Messengers from the Stars: On Science Fiction and Fantasy

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Messengers from the Stars: On Science Fiction and Fantasy

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Photo: Duarte Amaral Netto

EDITORIAL

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This issue of *Messengers from the Stars* is largely concerned with two interrelated notions: that of *utopia*, the imagination of an improved or idealized society,

and its obverse, *dystopia,* an imagination of a corrupted society governed and structured by the most corrosive human impulses. Critically examining these fictional worlds can often serve as a means to more fully understanding our own current realities; through the unfamiliar lens of the unreal, the myriad problems and challenges of our own world can be seen more clearly. Such a focus is particularly relevant in 2020, a year that has been marked by accelerated climate-related catastrophes, pervasive racial, ethnic, and religious conflict, the ascent of far-right authoritarianism, and a global pandemic that has transformed modern life and killed nearly two million people. The articles and stories in this year's issue shed light on how numerous works of fiction and film have engaged with these new and possible versions of our world.

Jonathan Hay's "Utopia's Extinction: The Anthroposcenic Landscapes of Ursula K. Le Guin," illustrates how Le Guin's fiction reconfigures humanity's relationship with its environment, offering an alternative to the harmful human agendas of controlling—and often ruthlessly exploiting—the natural world. Le Guin's *Hainish Cycle,* according to Hay, imagines a humanity recognizing its ultimate symbiosis with nature, rejecting overriding notions of utopian "progress."

Later utopian works by Le Guin and Margaret Atwood comprise the subject of Trang Dang's "Is there still hope for a better future? Probing the answer in Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* and Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*." In this article, Dang presents both novels as what Tom Moylan has called "critical utopias" that satirize and critique current social realities and offer the possibility of "a healthier and more harmonious society."

Recognizing a darker counterpoint to the vision offered by Le Guin and Atwood's work, "*Black Mirror's* 'Fifteen Million Merits': Re-Defining Human Bodies with Dystopian Technology," by Zita Hüsing examines "what it means to be *human* in our digital times." Hüsing argues that the "Fifteen Million Merits" episode of the BBC / Netflix series *Black Mirror* reveals and implicitly protests an accelerating late-capitalist nightmare, a dystopian interconnection between humanity and technology that ultimately dehumanizes and commodifies people.

In a similar interrogation of a capitalist dystopia, the FOX series *Gotham* (2014-2019) is the subject of Rhiannon McHarrie's "There are no heroes in Gotham": Subverting the Superhero Narrative and Depicting Dystopian Landscapes in *Gotham.*" Here, McHarrie discusses at length how the series, through an inversion of the

superhero narrative that focuses on primarily on villains, both builds and critiques a materialistic dystopia of corruption and power.

Luke Holmaas' essay "Some Years From This Exact Moment: Ambivalent Dystopian Science Fiction Satire" offers a take on a similar act of social critique as that present in *Gotham* through the analysis of "trashy" satire films *The Running Man, Southland Tales,* and *Gamer.* The "exaggeration and excess" in these films, Holmaas suggests, defines these works as "ambivalent dystopian science fiction satires" that are often misunderstood and unjustly dismissed by critics and scholars.

Likewise adjusting a critical and scholarly paradigm is Ali Bouacha Oualid and Kaid Nassima's essay "Bridging Afrofuturism and Arab SF: Locating the Contemporary Algerian SF within the Postcolonial Speculative Fiction." This essay situates the body of contemporary Algerian Science Fiction within the Afrofuturist and Post-Colonial frames by "reflecting on [the Arab and Afrofuturist] colonial and post-colonial experiences respectively," while also examining the relative scarcity of Arab and North African science fiction, which, in the authors' view, should have promoted "similar artistic expressions" to Black Afrofuturism, given the "historical commonalities" between the traditions.

A similar act of connection, this time between the past and future, is explored in Inês Vaz's "Navigating the Stars: Thinking the Present and Projecting the Future by Looking at the Past." Here, Vaz critically examines the animated steampunk film *Treasure Planet* (2002) as a recasting of the Victorian past and somewhat problematic "hopeful message for the future."

Mike Carey's short story "I Will Tell You Seven" takes place in a dystopian world of superstition and violence populated by sorcerers, ghosts, witches, giants, and shapeshifters. The story's undead protagonist, however, chronicles a righteous battle against monsters of another, far more dangerous type.

The issue's concluding entry is Farah AlYaqout's review of *Palestine+100: Stories from a Century after the Nakba,* the 2018 PEN Translate award-winning anthology of Palestinian science fiction. The collection, according to AlYaquot, explores through the futuristic, speculative lens the "dystopian reality" of the Palestinian diaspora, both within and without Palestine.

It is our hope that this issue of *Messengers from the Stars,* through its various interrogations of this world and other possible ones, offers insight into our particular

cultural and social reality. Enjoy!

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MONOGRAPH SECTION

Photo: Duarte Amaral Netto

Utopia's Extinction: the Anthroposcenic Landscapes of Ursula K. Le Guin

Jonathan Hay

University of Chester

Abstract | In the Anthropocene epoch, the utopian prospect which has structured civilizational development throughout recorded history is extinguished almost entirely. Our anthropocentric fantasies of dominion over the natural world have proven harmful not only to the biosphere we inhabit, but to the continued existence of our own species. Instead, new conceptualizations which foreground the role of humanity within its environment must take precedence. Intricate portrayals of humanity's interdependence within its planetary environment—and illustrations of the damage that our daily lives inflict upon the natural world—have long been apparent in the Science Fiction genre. By emphasising the importance of fostering and recognizing our species' symbiotic relationship with its natural world through practices of daily life, the Anthroposcenic landscapes of Ursula K. Le Guin's Science Fiction texts exert a posthuman vision which refutes anthropocentric ideologies, and decenters the notion of *progress* as an eschatology. Accordingly, this article closely analyses three texts of Le Guin's *Hainish Cycle* which particularly exemplify her Anthroposcenic objective; *The Word for World is Forest* (1972); *Planet of Exile* (1966); and *City of Illusions*

(1967). These texts extrapolate the Anthropocene epoch into a cosmic paradigm, and so demonstrate the extinction of utopian potential it personifies vividly.

Keywords | Anthropocene; Science Fiction; Le Guin; Posthumanism.

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Resumo | No Antropocénico, a perspetiva utópica que estruturou o desenvolvimento civilizacional ao longo da história registada extingue-se quase por completo. As nossas fantasias antropocénicas de domínio sobre o mundo natural provaram ser prejudiciais não apenas para a biosfera que habitamos, mas também para a existência contínua da nossa própria espécie. Ao invés, novas conceptualizações, que dão a conhecer o papel importante da humanidade no seu ambiente, devem ter precedência. Retratações detalhadas da interdependência da humanidade no seu ambiente planetário - e ilustrações dos danos que o nosso quotidiano inflige ao mundo natural - há muito que são visíveis no género da Ficção Científica. Ao enfatizar a importância de fomentar e reconhecer a relação simbiótica da nossa espécie com o seu mundo natural através de práticas da vida quotidiana, as paisagens Antropocénicas dos textos de Ficção Científica de Ursula K. Le Guin exercem uma visão pós-humanista que refuta as ideologias antropocêntricas, e distanciam a noção de *progresso* como uma escatologia. Consequentemente, este artigo analisa de perto três textos do *Hainish Cycle* de Le Guin que exemplificam particularmente o seu objetivo Antropocénico; *The Word for World is Forest* (1972); *Planet of Exile* (1966); e *City of Illusions* (1967). Estes textos extrapolam o Antropocénico para um paradigma cósmico, demonstrando assim a extinção do potencial utópico que vividamente personifica.

Palavras-chave | Antropocénico; Ficção Científica; Le Guin; Pós-Humanismo.

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1. Introduction

Francis Fukuyama's infamous utopian declaration of "the end of history" (133) has never appeared more mistaken than in the context of the devastating, globalized impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. For Fukuyama, the global trend towards a "universal and homogeneous state" (204) of economic development and political hegemony in contemporaneity would preclude the realisation of any "new, higher order" (136) than capitalist democracies, and hence, human sociocultural development was consummate. Patently, however, Fukuyama's treatise entirely failed to recognise the interconnectedness of our species in its planetary environment, rendering his utopian assertions entirely void. Rather, contemporary human existence coheres about

our embeddedness in earth systems; as the unprecedented interruption of the global economy throughout 2020 by a microscopic virus has forcefully demonstrated, we are in no manner distinct actors from our planetary environment. In this sense, the pandemic has reaffirmed the appropriateness of the geological term Anthropocene as a means of describing the unprecedented epoch we inhabit in history; the phrase not only stresses that humanity "has become a geological force capable of affecting all life on this planet" (Braidotti 5), but also emphasises our species' ephemerality in geological terms.

As this suggests, the advent of the Anthropocene is anathema to the two inmost fundaments of utopian discourses—their eschatological conjecture of linear sociocultural *progress*, and their anthropocentric basis. In the Anthropocene epoch, "most human societies have increasingly adopted daily habits of living that are leading to a point of non-return in ecological and sustainable terms" (Ferrando 104), and so, our daily lives are quite literally facilitating the extinction of the utopian ideal. Consequently, the correlate term Anthroposcenic has become a critical locus "for the humanities and social sciences to play a more active role in shaping the climate change debate" (Matless 118). As a concept, the Anthroposcenic is any form of narrative which "foregrounds the way in which landscape becomes emblematic of environmental transformation" (Matless 118), and Anthroposcenic narratives consequently demarcate the extinction of utopian possibility in visceral terms, as a result of our exploitation of Earth's environment. Hence, the Anthroposcenic demonstrates, in subjective rather than objective terms, the impact of its eponymous geological epoch on our lived realities, and broadens the scope of Anthropocene enquiry beyond exclusively scientific discourses. Crucially, the term is applicable to both fictional and corporeal landscapes, as Anthroposcenic narratives intentionally "act as a meeting point for imaginative and material worlds, and [...] signal their interconnections" (Matless 118). As this article will shortly proceed to demonstrate, the Anthroposcenic landscapes of Ursula K. Le Guin's Science Fiction[1] work to vicariously demonstrate the interconnectedness of the Anthropocene epoch and daily human life.

Since the utopian truisms of progress and anthropocentrism have not only engendered, but also been decentred *by*, the Anthropocene epoch, there is an urgent

[1] Hereafter, SF.

need for our species to adopt alternative philosophical frameworks which are non-anthropocentric and non-teleological. In this vein, the discourse of Critical Posthumanism, which "focuses on decentering the human" (Ferrando 22), provides a suitable framework with which to analyse Le Guin's Anthroposcenic landscapes. As Francesca Ferrando stresses, from a posthumanist perspective, "the Anthropocene marks the extent of the impact of human activities on a planetary level, and thus stresses the urgency for humans to become aware of pertaining to an ecosystem which, when damaged, negatively affects the human condition as well" (Ferrando 22). Correspondingly, the Le Guin texts discussed within this article render an Anthroposcenic vision of the posthuman future through estranged representations of mundanity, and provide a cautionary reflection upon how our everyday lives in the present delimit the future of our species.

By emending and rejecting many of the established tropes of Golden Age SF, Le Guin's *Hainish Cycle* (1964 - 2000) redefined the assumptions of the future history motif, and became an instrumental proponent of New Wave SF. As George Edgar Slusser emphasises, "Le Guin's 'future history' differs greatly from the Heinleinian variety, where each episode is a decisive step in man's conquest of the universe. Here both man and technology are defeated" (10-11). Patently, Le Guin rejects the eschatological and anthropocentric tropes which had until that point been a staple of the SF genre, repudiating naïve utopian ideals in favour of an increased emphasis on subjectivity. Significantly, this dialectical departure is manifested in the *Hainish Cycle* via Le Guin's prominent depiction of the primacy of the everyday within a multiplicitous array of posthuman societies. Nevertheless, Le Guin scholarship has historically neglected to engage at length with the conspicuously mundane qualities of her SF texts, despite there having been various calls for critics to do so. In 1979, James Warren Bittner proposed that Le Guin criticism "should concentrate on *relationships* between the so-called 'zero world' we operate in from day to day, and the 'other' worlds" (40) which comprise the overt Science Fictional[2] fundament of her series, and likewise, in 1981, John Fekete proposed that scholars consider how Le Guin's SF figures "the reconstitution of everyday life" (97). This article endeavours to at least

[2] Hereafter, SFnal.

partially redress this scholarly deficit, by demonstrating the vital contribution of her texts' mundane and repetitive qualities to Le Guin's Anthroposcenic objective.

In the *Hainish Cycle*, our posthuman descendants persist only by virtue of the patronage of the Hainish species, whose spaceflight technologies alone have allowed Terrans to "leave our ruined world" (*The Dispossessed* 889). The series' post-apocalyptic Earth emblematises Le Guin's redress to the utopian and anthropocentric tendencies of Golden Age future histories, standing as a prominent archetype of the Anthroposcenic vistas that Le Guin evokes on numerous other worlds within the series' galaxy. Neither is Earth important; "the Terran Colony was an experiment" (*The Left Hand of Darkness* 453) of the Ancient Hainish, one dataset among dozens throughout the galaxy. As in the *Doctor Who* serial "The Dæmons" (1971), Terrans in the *Hainish Cycle* have been "just another laboratory rat" ("The Dæmons" n.pg.), manipulated unwittingly throughout the course of our recorded history by a more developed species.

Additionally, the narratives of the series are set within the ninety-third Hainish Cycle, suggesting that Hainish civilisation is explicitly recursive, encompassing "a history of three million years" (*The Telling* 598). Because Le Guin does not explicate the basis of these Cycles, readers must envisage the overarching SFnal history of the Hainish precisely by comprehending that they cannot cognitively grasp it. Hence, the role of Terrans is once more decentered, this time vicariously, through readers' frustrated perspective of the series' fragmentary plot. Even at its textual surface, the *Hainish Cycle* refutes the utopian telos common to its SFnal precursors, subverts humanistic ideologies of linear *progress*, and radically destabilises the term *Anthropos*. In tandem, the local mundane components which pervade of each text of the series compound these overarching posthuman moves at the narrative level.

Ultimately, the series' plot results from the Ancient Hainish having altered the humanoid species spread across the galaxy's "chromosomes [...] a million years ago" ("The Matter of Seggri" 255), for purportedly scientific purposes, before abandoning them entirely. As Sandra J. Lindow remarks, their negligent attitude towards their dataset is a "common aspect of the supposedly 'objective' scientific mindset" (Lindow 8) and, damningly, the majority of the genetic alterations which the Ancient Hainish have perpetrated have proved disagreeable to the undeveloped populations affected. Their separation from the technologies of their ancestors ensures that the protagonists of the series are rarely space-faring übermenschen in the utopian mould, but instead,

are typically modest natives, who are absorbed entirely with the minutiae of their everyday existences, and can scarcely comprehend the wider galaxy. Therefore, whilst the cultural differences engendered by genetic engineering are the prime SFnal quality of the series, the prominence of this aspect of the *Hainish Cycle* in itself disputes the purported objectivity of scientific enquiry. Hence, by consistently placing narrative focus upon representations of subjective experience throughout the series, rather than the genetic technologies used to produce those subjectivities, the schema of Le Guin's series literalises her New Wave move from technological, to environmental and sociological concerns.

Additionally, the unification strategies of the Ekumen—the contemporary Hainish organisation attempting to reunite the disparate peoples of the galaxy throughout the series—epitomise the perspective advanced by Clive Hamilton that "humankind became a unified entity—the *anthropos*—for the first time only in the second half of the twentieth century" (49) as a result of globalization, and hence, instigated the Anthropocene. Throughout the series, the Ekumen promulgate the same capitalist ideologies which have licensed humanity's turn away from largely circular, sustainable, practices of everyday life, and towards linear ideologies of *progress* and consumerist lifestyle paradigms. The proliferation of the Ekumenical age, in this light, becomes an extended textual metaphor for "the ouroboros of capitalism" (Hay 1), which is one of the prime causes of the Anthropocene. Accordingly, it transpires that the Ekumen's ostensibly utopian endeavours generate only Anthroposcenic outcomes in praxis.

This article now proceeds to closely analyse three texts of the *Hainish Cycle* which particularly exemplify Le Guin's Anthroposcenic objective within the series in micro; *The Word for World is Forest* (1972); *Planet of Exile* (1966); and *City of Illusions* (1967). In common, a close, sustained focus on the changeability of their fictional landscapes marks these three texts as Anthroposcenic. Within the narrative scope of *The Word for World is Forest* and *Planet of Exile* we witness the onset of momentous changes in their planetary landscapes, whereas *City of Exile* instead interpellates its readers to extrapolate the divergence of its deserted Earth from the milieu of their familiar planetary home. Accordingly, these three Anthroposcenic texts not only comprise potent exemplars of the value of subjective reflections within Anthropocene discourses, but additionally, they vicariously underscore the manner in

which the epoch will further transform our everyday lives, those of our descendants, and that of the vast array of non-human life across the globe.

2. *The Word for World is Forest*

The Anthroposcenic panorama of *The Word for World is Forest* centres upon the novella's didactic critique of colonialism. At the outset of the novella, the Terran military has annexed the densely-forested planet Athshe, enslaved its native population, and is now proceeding to implement extensive deforestation practices which will decimate the flora of the planet in a matter of years. Yet, in the context of Earth's recursive history of colonial and ecological atrocities, the planet Athshe might just as easily be "Idaho in 1950 [...] Kentucky in 1830 [...] Gaul in 50" BCE (*Forest* 8).[3] Hence, Le Guin implies that Terrans will perpetrate almost identical genocides and ecocides on every planet they come to inhabit, and that Athshe is merely a novel territory for their enduring capitalist enterprises to exploit. The Terrans who have annexed Athshe justify their presence, the ecological devastation they wreak, and their violent subjugation of the natives with the rationale that it has "been done once before" (*Forest* 7), when the Ancient Hainish colonised the planet. By invoking historical atrocities as a justification, they fruitlessly attempt to rationalize the xenophobic violence and ecocide they perpetrate, vicariously reminding readers that the Anthroposcenic vistas perpetrated by their own societies are by no means unique in the annals of human history; they are the enduring legacy of anthropocentric and expansionist dogmas.

The military's incentive for invading Athshe is to collect wood which can be formed into "clean sawn planks, more prized on Earth than gold" (*Forest* 7), since Earth's demand for wood far outstrips the volume that its own deforested world can provide. Clearly, after destroying the forests of their own planet, Terrans have turned outward to find more of that lucrative material which is a "necessary luxury" (*Forest* 7) component of their daily existences. Thus, they reproduce the Anthroposcenic milieu of their home planet on each world they conquer. Their ignorant "hypothesis of the unlimited resources of nature" (Ferrando 174) is symptomatic of the anthropocentric ideologies which license the environmental devastation of our planet for commercial

[3] Given the novella's contemporary context, Le Guin's implication was that "Vietnam in 1972" should be appended to this list.

gain in contemporaneity. Since the posthumans living back on Earth only see the end-products of these ecocidal atrocities, the novella allegorises the cognitive lacuna in our own world which lies between the violence of the Anthropocene and the tranquil everyday facade of our entirely causal consumerist behaviours. Maike Weiβpflug argues that in order to comprehend the Anthropocene, "narratives have to be told, recent and old narratives about human-environment relations" (26), which uncover the complexities of how closely our daily lives are implicated in the destruction of our planetary environment. In *The Word for World is Forest*, Le Guin, achieves that same anti-utopian goal on a galactic scale, by depicting the future of human-environmental relations via SFnal means.

Pointedly, the everyday lives of Athshean posthumans are radically different to those of Terrans. They dream throughout the day and night "ten to fourteen times in the diurnal cycle", whilst awake and asleep, and dreaming is therefore a prominent, typified, aspect of their quotidian routines, conditioning "their life both day and night" (*Forest* 25, 62). Furthermore, via their understanding of violence as an "evil dream that must be understood lest it be repeated" (*Forest* 74), Athsheans comprehend the cyclicality of exploitative actions far more readily than Terrans do. Because their people have developed no high technologies, and are so embedded within their natural world as to rely on birds to provide their "garbage service", they comprised "a static, stable, uniform society. [...] Perfectly integrated, and wholly unprogressive [...] a climax state" (*Forest* 28, 39) prior to the Terran exploitation of their world. Athsheans therefore provide an exemplar of symbiotic living, and a redress to the eschatological and anthropocentric ideologies of Terrans and the Ekumen themselves. As Lindow argues, the *Hainish Cycle* suggests that "[l]iving simply in community is far more important than cell phones and computers" (20), and thus, Le Guin implies that diffuse cultural agency and ecological modes of living are superior ideals to capitalist orthodoxies of *progress*.

As here, Le Guin's Anthroposcenic milieux comprise estranging "extrapolations of what the persistence of money and commodification holds in store for us" (Jameson 230), displacing our contemporary climate anxieties into the far future, whilst simultaneously bringing them to bear upon our own Anthropocene epoch figuratively, via their conspicuously mundane components. Hence, Le Guin's texts comprise a form of anti-utopianism characterised not by "the standard dystopian lust

for power" (Jameson 162), but by their plausibly mundane rhetorical devices, which imply the proximity of ecological catastrophe to our own temporality. Rather than the dystopian or unknown, they posit the familiar as their central existential threat, and therefore, they figure the changing environment of our own world as an environ rapidly threatening to become inimical to human existence. Although "anxiety about extinction was common in the nuclear era, the posthuman condition, of the anthropocene [sic], extends the death horizon to most species" (Braidotti 111), and as such, Le Guin's Anthroposcenes illustrate the proximity of utopia's extinction in cosmic, yet strikingly allegorical, terms. *Planet of Exile*, meanwhile, emphasises the Anthroposcenic interruption which our species poses to established environmental paradigms.

3. *Planet of Exile*

In *Planet of Exile* the primacy of the environmental aspects of biological existence are further emphasised, via the explicit enclosure of the novel's native protagonists within the recursive planetary cycles of the planet Alterra, each of whose Seasons spans sixteen Terran years. At the outset of the novel, the Alterran native Rolery is initially unconcerned at seeing a herald carrying news of "storm, disaster, winter, war" (*Exile* 119) to her people. Because each Year on Alterra is equivalent to sixty-five Terran years, her people necessarily have "short memories" (*Exile* 125) in respect of the seasonal occurrences of their planet. Likewise, after she narrowly survives a high spring tide on a stretch of the coast, Rolery cannot "stop shaking" (*Exile* 124) at first, but within a minute, is entirely focused upon "put[ting] her hair straight" (*Exile* 125). As her swift cognitive shift from existential to quotidian matters emphasises, she cannot comprehend the tidal wave which almost ended her life, as it lies entirely outside her cognitive frame of reference. In contrast, Wold, her Grandfather, is able to recall "a man who came running from the north with the side of his face burnt and bloody, crying, [...] that hoarse shout ring[ing] across his lifetime" (*Exile* 131). Unlike Rolery, he perceives the repetition of events from more than half a century before, as the onset of another sixteen years of Winter begins on Alterra.

Wold recognises the consummate extent to which the cyclical pattern of Alterra's vastly protracted seasons habituates Tevarans to recursive developmental paradigms, generation after generation, as he has seen "men swarming to build up the

houses and walls of the Winter City with the old stones on the old foundations" (*Exile* 131) once before. Likewise, as Rolery explains to the farborn Jakob Agat:

> 'I was born out of season, in the Summer Fallow,' she said. 'It does happen with us, but very rarely; and you see — when Winter's over I'll be too old to bear a Spring child. I'll never have a son. Some old man will take me for a fifth wife one of these days, but the Winter Fallow has begun, and come Spring I'll be old... So I will die barren. It's better for a woman not to be born at all than to be born out of season as I was...' (*Exile* 154-155)

Conspicuously, the iterative cycles of their planet entirely condition the tropisms and consciousness of Alterrans. As members of their civilisation have to contend with more than five "thousand nights of Winter, five thousand days of it" (*Exile* 222) over one unbroken stretch of their life, the omnipotence of their natural world is inescapable.[4] As the journeys of "the hunters in Winter, the forays in Spring, the great wanderings of the long days of Summer" suggest (*Exile* 149), their societies must be conditioned by the principle of deep consonance with their natural world in order to endure. Hence, although Wold reminisces about "a lost brightness, Summer's irrecoverable warmth" (*Exile* 149), he is humbly content with his mortality, since he recognises that his role within Alterra's planetary cycle is naturally drawing to a close. Accordingly, he looks "with great benevolence on each day and on all younger men", since the knowledge that he is "very far along the way to death" (*Exile* 186) provides assurance of continuity with the lives of his ancestors and descendents.

Although the iterative cycles of life on Alterra have remained stable for generations, it transpires, in a decidedly Anthroposcenic development, that Wold's complacent attitude towards the natural cycles of the planet has now become outdated, as a result of the evolving behaviours of another of its civilizations. No longer content to merely subsist in wilderness spaces, the nomadic "Gaal are coming [north] all at once" (*Exile* 134) this Year, having adopted an expansionist ideology and become intent on conquering the settled populations they had passed by peacefully in the past. On a planet defined by protracted seasons, and a corresponding resource scarcity, the Gaal having "united all their tribes and made an army of them" (*Exile* 135) necessarily leads

[4] This specific ecological aspect of the novel is conspicuously similar to numerous later SF&F works; in particular, Brian W. Aldiss's *Helliconia* trilogy (1982-1985) and George R. R. Martin's perennially incomplete series *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1991-).

to all Tevaran civilisations also becoming desynchronized from the planet's annual cycles of palimpsestuous repetition. Although the stark cyclical landscape of their planet remains stable, its connotations have now evolved drastically. Although the Askatevar now inhabit "a new time" (*Exile* 135), this Anthroposcenic development is unfathomable to their people, who are so wholly conditioned by the natural cycles of their planet that they anticipate cyclicality in all aspects of life. *Planet of Exile* therefore expresses the extinction of utopian possibility in allegorical terms. Just as the historical wisdom which Wold has accumulated over the decades of his life is delegitimized within the novel's narrative, our own habitual adherence to established lifestyle practices in the Anthropocene harshly delimits the potential of our species realizing Utopia, jeopardising—as Agat puts it—"the life of mankind on this world" (*Exile* 138).

As such, the Anthroposcenic paradigm shift on Alterra transforms Tevaran cultures irrevocably. As no individual on Alterra "remembers the Year before last" (*Exile* 148), the exclusively oral history of the Askatevar is profoundly recursive. Accordingly, the nucleus of their society is the ritual of Stone-Pounding, in which they have historically used rocks to produce a "single ceaseless rhythm, the concord, the hard heartbeat [...] pounding on, and on, and on" (*Exile* 145). Through its prominent repetitive and cyclical aspects, this ceremony has fostered awareness of continuity between the Askatevar, their ancestors, and the planetary landscapes which condition their existence. Yet, although the necessity of this practice of "completing the circle" (*Exile* 144) is deeply ingrained in their history and culture, the tradition has now become "meaningless, humiliating" (*Exile* 165); their co-dependent interrelation with the landscapes of their planet has been impaired. As such, "the pounding of stones" sounds like nothing but "clatter and conflict" at this point (*Exile* 165); the natural cycles which the ritual emulates have been perverted, effecting a conspicuous Anthroposcenic interruption within the otherwise consistent rhythm of the history of their civilisation.

In marked contrast, the quotidian lives of the neighbouring farborn people have become ever more closely interrelated within Alterra's iterative cycles since that colony's space-faring ancestors were stranded on the planet generations earlier. Historically, they had not even been able to digest Alterran foodstuffs without taking "periodic doses of certain enzymoids" (*Exile* 214), and so the fundamental biological process of nourishment had been a protracted chore for them for more than a century. In Rolery's time, however, a number of the farborn have recently seen no ill effects,

despite having not "taken an enzymoid shot or pill for two or three moonphases" (*Exile* 215), implying that their species' digestive systems are gradually adapting to the local nutrients. Less fortuitously, their birth rate has steeply declined, and their settlement is now populated with "houses that ha[ve] been deserted" (*Exile* 218) for a generation. Likewise, whilst they had historically been immune to the pathogens of Alterra, there are now recorded instances of farborn individuals dying a "foul death" (*Exile* 211) from infection.[5] Their bodies, it appears, are naturally adapting to the material conditions of the Alterran lifeworld "little by little" (*Exile* 155), and their biological processes are rapidly becoming subject to the planet's protracted natural cycles. Hence, the farborn are becoming Alterrans *de jure*, but only ephemerally, as the process of acclimatisation to their new environment is literally precipitating the extinction of their people.

Likewise, despite their preservation of documents of their ancestors' culture, the farborn are acutely aware that "from day to day and Year to Year a little knowledge would always be lost, supplanted by some more immediately useful bit of information concerning daily existence here and now" (*Exile* 143). As they "were written for men who knew more than" they do about scientific and technological disciplines (*Exile* 153), the books of the farborn are no longer anywhere near as relevant to their current situation as subjective knowledge of everyday life on Alterra is. Consequently, their ancestors' rarefied knowledge is displaced by their own daily interactions with the Alterran environment, causing the gradual extinction of the former variety of knowledge in a measured entropic trend. The most efficient weapons that Alterrans have developed are "lances — long, crude, unfinished" (*Exile* 192), and the farborn are haunted by the prospect of becoming such "stupid barbarians" (*Exile* 216) as the natives, via their regression to such a low technological paradigm.[6] Their rapidly declining birth rate, however, renders such concerns extraneous. As the farborn Pasfal asserts, their people will continue to die off "*little by little, one by one*" (*Exile* 163), until their group is quite literally extinct, along with the last vestiges of SFnal knowledge on Alterra.

[5] This symptom of their adaptation to Alterra poignantly contrasts the narrative of Kim Stanley Robinson's *Aurora*, wherein a mission of intergenerational interstellar colonists is forced to return from their colony planet immediately, due to their lack of immune response to an alien pathogen that they encounter there.

[6] The trope of reversion to barbarism in an isolated colony is echoed in the 1977 *Doctor Who* serial "The Face of Evil".

For Frederic Jameson, “the genuinely anti-utopian is always driven by the passionate desire to disprove Utopia” (Jameson 381). Correspondingly, Le Guin’s Anthroposcenic landscapes emblematise the dwindling prospect of utopian human society, and redirect the prospective gaze of the SF genre towards the comprehension of our deep interdependence with our planetary environment. Hence, although the increasingly expansionist regime of the Gaal is no fault of the Askatevar, it necessitates a profound transformation of their society nonetheless. As the farborn are simultaneously forced to recognise, the interconnections between the inhabitants of Alterra and the landscapes they inhabit are the principal condition of their existences. *Planet of Exile* thus stages an Anthroposcenic humbling of its posthuman civilisations in the face of the potency of their natural world. By illustrating the extinction of the posthuman future, Le Guin delineates the extinction of utopian possibility in the Anthropocene.

4. *City of Illusions*

City of Illusions, meanwhile, is set on a largely-deserted Earth, which has become rewilded over millennia by natural means, as a result of the enslavement of its vastly-reduced posthuman population by the alien Shing. Through this forsaken landscape, Le Guin envisages the cessation of *Anthropos* as a geological force, its scattered remnants reduced to pastoral existence upon a desolate planet which is gradually returning to a state of equilibrium in their absence. Only alien intervention, it appears, has halted the intensification of the Anthropocene, at the cost of the autonomy of Earth’s posthuman population.

When Falk, the novel’s central protagonist, is first introduced, his most significant concern is learning “not to wet the bed” (*Illusions* 229); although he was in fact an Alterran emissary to Earth named Ramarren, the memories of his former life on Alterra have been razed by the Shing, and his mind has become a *tabula rasa*. As Falk, he must not only relearn even the simplest tenets of civilised life, but additionally, must become acclimatised to the monotonous conditions of his new life on Earth. Falk-Ramarren’s reduction in stature parallels the situation of the Earth’s posthumans, whom the Shing have likewise enslaved psychologically, by exacerbating the mundane aspects of their lifeworlds. Like the ancestors of the Terrans he meets, Falk-Ramarren

once travelled casually between planets, but now "dare not go a hundred miles from home" (*Illusions* 238).

Equally, Terran foodstuffs are "sound but monotonous", and their lives are defined by "frugality" to the extent that they cannot imagine how existence could be anything other than entirely dreary and changeless (*Illusions* 235). Their private lives are also "rigidly scheduled by rite, custom, and tabu" (*Illusions* 275), and thus, ritualistic behaviours condition their consciousness far more effectively than overt enslavement by the Shing ever could. One community of Terran posthumans, for instance, is perpetually absorbed in "sailing, swimming, and sex" (*Illusions* 377); the sibilance here emphasising the unmitigated similitude which characterises their decadent and lackadaisical way of life.

Furthermore, the Shing permit Terrans to operate "various automatic tools or devices used in house-cleaning, cooking, washing" (*Illusions* 234), but prohibit all other forms of advanced technology. Hence, the appliances in their homesteads are the most developed technologies available to the posthumans of Earth, and accordingly, domestic considerations are the most novel aspects of their lives. As the Shing readily employ "tiny impact-missiles programmed to home in on anything that contained a fusion element" (*Illusions* 273), Terrans are unable to develop any technology which might facilitate their escape from this monotonous subjugation. Via the entrainment of posthuman consciousness exclusively to the domestic sphere, the Shing need do "nothing themselves" (*Illusions* 367) to control the populace of Earth. Indeed, their rule cannot be considered anything but monotonous even in respect of their methods of discipline; they consequently "seem rather pitiful, lost on a world that is not their own and yet ruling it, without any joy in their conquest" (Bucknall 29).

As the disused tarmac highways covered by "pine and hemlock" (p. 245) which now delineate the borders between communities of Terrans make apparent, the end of human history has truly arrived, as *Anthropos* is no longer a geological force in any sense. As such, the changelessness of their lives seems nothing atypical or sinister to Terrans, and they readily acknowledge their dethronement as, ever since the "stars had been gained, and lost again [...] the years went on, so many years that the forest of archaic times, destroyed utterly during the era when men had made and kept their history, had grown up again" (*Illusions* 233). When Falk-Ramarren ventures away from the Terran community which has sheltered him for six years, he experiences anew the

necessity of living "by hunting [...] that slowed his daily pace", and the nightly necessity of "build[ing] up a shelter of boughs and bark against the rain; and sleep; and next day go[ing] on" (*Illusions* 257). As he ventures through the wilderness in search of his lost identity, he must first learn to comprehend his embeddedness in the alien world which surrounds him over the course of "the next day, and the next" (*Illusions* 271), via a veritable torrent of repetitive perambulation.

Thus, even in the process of attempting to break free from the monotony of his Terran existence, he is drawn even more comprehensively within the lived realities of Earthly life, as the text's emphasis upon the rigorous verisimilitude of his daily life at this point illustrates. Later in the novel, he must cross "the Great Plains on foot — which is soon said, but was not soon or easily done" (*Illusions* 288), a line synecdochic of Le Guin's Anthroposcenic object more broadly. As here, Le Guin's estranging survey of alien environmental modes of relation encompasses a pronounced stylistic divergence from the teleological utopian tropes common to earlier SF texts. Instead, by depicting alternate ecological frames of reference in rigorous detail, she foregrounds the oft-disregarded mundane events and phenomena which underpin reality, and resituates the SF genre's abortive utopian gaze towards the prospect of sustainable existence enacted through everyday life.

After being recaptured by the Shing, Falk-Ramarren realises that his best defence against their plan to "raze [his] mind once" again is to reappropriate the memories of existence on Earth which he has assimilated over the past six years (*Illusions* 344). As he recognises, the experiences he has gained phenomenologically as Falk are both the only means by which he can prove the nefariousness of the Shing, and his sole chance of surviving the impending mind razing. Only through the adroit exploitation of his mundane, embodied experiences can he achieve either objective. He consequently decides to fight in the name of "the house in the forest, the sunlight in the Clearing" (*Illusions* 346) of Earth, and his resistance through the sphere of these lived realities proves decisive. As such, when he returns to consciousness after the attempted mind wipe, Ramarren is able to recall "the sunlight breaking through the dark of an old forest", and realises that the skin of his hands is "toughened and weathered as if he had been out in the open for a long time" (*Illusions* 353).

These embodied artefacts from his life as Falk trigger the realisation that his mind has been razed, allow him to recover his Falk persona, and ultimately, effect his

manipulation of the novel's eucatastrophe. Hence, at the very climax of *City of Illusions*, the embodied experiences of his agrarian life on Earth are reinscribed with significance, and become the transcendent tools with which he evades the mental dominion of the Shing. As the conclusion of the novel suggests, environmentalism is the "issue that is immanent to all others, in so far as the earth is our middle and common ground" (Braidotti 81), and thus, it is only by reconnecting with the Earth first-hand that Falk-Ramarren is able to achieve self-actualization. Even on the forsaken Earth of the novel, his existence remains entirely contingent upon his biological interrelation with the natural world he inhabits. As readers, we are pressed to query the proximity of the novel's Earth against the Anthroposcenic horizons conditioned by our own everyday lives.

5. Conclusion

By emphasising the importance of fostering and recognizing our species' symbiotic relationship with the natural world through the practices of daily life, the texts of the *Hainish Cycle* exert an Anthroposcenic vision which refutes anthropocentric ideologies, and decenters the role of technological *progress* as an eschatology within the SF genre. By allegorically demonstrating the close interconnectedness of our daily lives with the advent of Anthroposcenic phenomena, Le Guin vividly demonstrates the comprehensive extent to which the prospect of utopia has been problematised in contemporaneity by the evolving context of the Anthropocene. As the Anthroposcenic turn of her *Hainish Cycle* emphasises, if they are at present not yet quite extinguished altogether, the last vestiges of utopian possibility—which have sparked deep within human thought for millennia—teeter on the edge of extinction. Aptly, however, the enduring relevance of Le Guin's Anthroposcenic texts to the SF genre is affirmed by the rise to prominence of a myriad of cli-fi texts over the last two decades—a development which Le Guin's works both anticipated, and acted as a vital precursor to.

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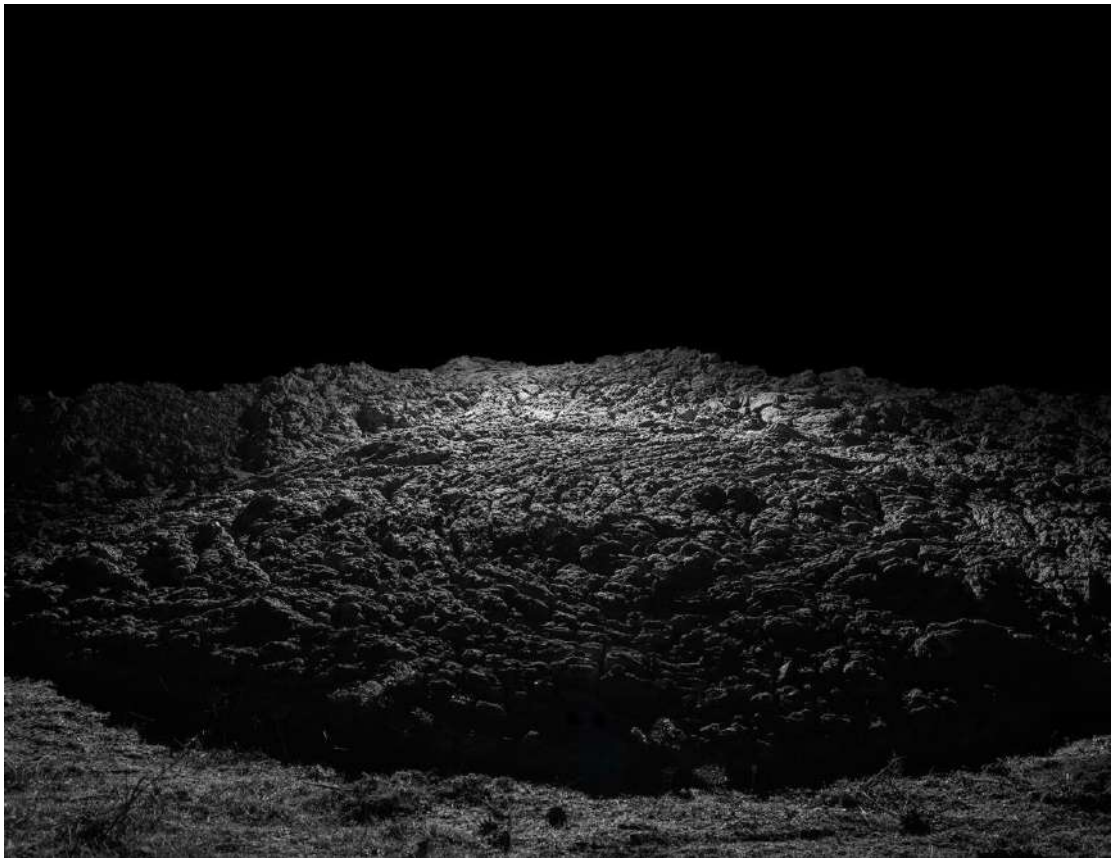

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Is There Still Hope for a Better Future? Probing the Answer in Ursula Le Guin's The Dispossessed and Margaret Atwood's The Year of the Flood

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Abstract | This essay examines two novels: *The Dispossessed* (1974) by Ursula Le Guin and *The Year of the Flood* (2009) by Margaret Atwood. Written respectively in the wake of the oil crisis in 1973 and in the contemporary culture of rampant consumerism and corporate hoarding, both set out to criticise the predominant political and socio-economic structure that is capitalism and construct realisable utopias as alternatives to this system. This essay argues that, while offering a telling critique of contemporary society, both novels express strong hope for a better future. As the present world descends into socio-political and ecological crisis, both novels' critical responses to this and their utopian visions are timely and vital. To illuminate and demonstrate these points, this essay engages with Tom Moylan's concept of critical utopia for guidance and an analytical framework, while also using textual analysis as its methodology. It aims to conclude that by satirising current society and proposing new ways to create a more attainable utopia, and above all, through their storytelling, Le Guin and

Atwood demonstrate that, far from being wishful thinking, a healthier and more harmonious society is possible and within reach.

Keywords | critical utopia; science fiction; utopian traditions; utopian communities; late capitalism.

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Resumo | Este ensaio examina dois romances: *The Dispossessed* (1974) da autoria de Ursula Le Guin e *The Year of the Flood* (2009) de Margaret Atwood. Escritos respetivamente na sequência da crise do petróleo de 1973 e na cultura contemporânea do consumismo desenfreado e do aglutinamento empresarial, ambas se propõem criticar a estrutura política e socioeconómica predominante que é o capitalismo e a construir utopias realizáveis como alternativas a este sistema. Este ensaio argumenta que, embora ofereçam uma crítica reveladora da sociedade contemporânea, ambos os romances expressam uma forte esperança por um futuro melhor. À medida que o mundo atual cai em crises sociopolíticas e ecológicas, as respostas críticas de ambos os romances a esta situação, e as suas visões utópicas, tornam-se oportunas e vitais. Para iluminar e demonstrar estes pontos, o presente ensaio está ligado ao conceito de utopia crítica de Tom Moylan, para orientação e enquadramento analítico, utilizando também análise textual como metodologia. Este testo visa concluir que, ao satirizar a sociedade atual e ao propor novas formas de criar uma utopia mais atingível, e sobretudo, através das suas narrativas, Le Guin e Atwood demonstram que, longe de ser um pensamento ilusório, uma sociedade mais saudável e harmoniosa é possível e está ao nosso alcance.

Palavras-chave | utopia crítica; ficção científica; tradições utópicas; comunidades utópicas; capitalismo tardio.

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Utopian tradition beginning with Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) posits an already perfected society, which leaves no room for improvement, and later with H. G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia* (1905), which imposes sameness on individuals, thus eliminating individualism. Postdating More and Wells's views about utopia were a series of events from the emergence of Stalinism to the failure of communism in the twentieth century. These events drove theorists like Aurel Kolnai to adopt an anti-utopian stance, claiming that all utopias would eventually lead to authoritarianism, as portrayed in dystopian novels like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *1984* (1949) (21). Seeing how "the culture of the twentieth century is littered with Utopian schemes" and how we take for granted that "none of them

succeeded", Robert Hughes concludes that people have accepted "the failure of Utopia" (164). However, the emergence of critical utopia from the late 1960s onwards argues otherwise; it still sees clearly the possibility of utopia and its critical position in evaluating the power structures of the world we live in (Hanson 246). Termed by critic Tom Moylan, the concept of critical utopia is described as becoming aware of "the limitations of the utopian tradition" (10). Critical utopia allows itself to

> [...] dwell on the conflict between the original world and the utopian society opposed to it so that the process of social change is more directly articulated, [and to] focus on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within the utopian society itself [to offer] more recognisable and dynamic alternatives. (10-11)

Written in the wake of the oil crisis in 1973 and of late capitalism in the twenty-first century, Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) and Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* (2009) share the authors' optimism towards the prospect of an eco-anarchist and eco-religious utopia respectively. This essay argues that both authors refuse to accept the "failure of Utopia." Following utopian tradition, they create an alternative narrative of a realisable society to satirise the flaws in the current state of late capitalism. However, they differ markedly from utopian tradition in their repudiation of an already perfected society and individual sameness. Adopting the stance of critical utopia, these authors highlight the importance of individual differences and the pressing necessity of change in enriching and improving society. While Le Guin does so through her concept of time, Atwood pursues that aim via her framework of spirituality. This essay sets out to analyse and demonstrate these points accordingly, while primarily employing Moylan's concept of critical utopia as an analytical framework.

In *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin takes readers on a tour of Urras and particularly of A-Io, one of the main countries on this planet, a tour whereby she criticises late capitalism and the centralisation of governmental power in real society. Considering this point, Victor Urbanowicz argues that A-Io "corresponds to the USA and some Western European power" (n.pg). To some degree, this statement is correct because both Urras and the real world advocate private ownership and rampant consumerism, and take power hierarchy and social inequality for granted. As Keng the Ambassador from Terra remarks, "the government here is not despotic. The rich are very rich indeed,

but the poor are not so very poor. They are neither enslaved nor starving" (Le Guin 292). Because the socio-political structures of A-Io do not *yet* threaten the survival of the poor, it is acceptable and normal that their quality of life remains poor while the rich live extravagant lifestyles and have more social freedom.

While Urbanowicz's argument is correct when one considers the capitalist system that A-Io as well as America and Western Europe all share, the argument might be inadequate when freedom of speech is examined: Urbanowicz's use of the word 'correspond' is probably inaccurate in comparing A-Io with real society. The former is rather an exaggerated, dystopian version of the latter. This is because this freedom is generally not inhibited in America and Western Europe. In addition, although it is restricted in nations such as North Korea and Russia, governments would murder or imprison their opponents clandestinely and, in some circumstances, publicly but would stop short of an open, cold-blooded massacre (Hwang and Filipov n.pg). That A-Io serves as a distortion of reality is vividly illustrated in the protest demonstration in Nio Esseia. Staged by "syndicalists" and "libertarians" – with Shevek delivering a speech on anarchism – it ends publicly in gunshots, terror, and death (Le Guin 243 and 248-9). As the protest threatens the exercise of power as well as the long-standing power hierarchies in A-Io, it must be suppressed altogether. The image of "police helicopters" towering over the protesters, accompanied by their "clattering" noise and "machine guns" firing from above, signifies the absolute power of the Directorate and their authoritative position, to which those demonstrators cannot reach but have to succumb (Le Guin 248-9). Le Guin describes the marchers as pressing "in panic" and rising up "into a wailing like a great wind" as they suffer from extreme violence; at the end, "the dead and wounded were too close-pressed to fall" (Le Guin 248-9). This bloodshed of these demonstrators and the brute force of the police serve as a grotesque representation of the government in real society. These events criticise and condemn their power structures and the way the government readily abuse their supremacy to eliminate whoever questions their domination.

Having critiqued capitalism and the centralisation of power through the portrayal of Urras, Le Guin proposes an alternative societal model functioning under the eco-anarchist system. She does so by juxtaposing Urras with Anarres. The latter is a stateless, classless and decentralised society based on the foundation of freedom and solidarity, or as Le Guin calls it, Odonian principles. There is no practice of power there

as “the computers [...] coordinated the administration of things, the division of labour, and the distribution of goods” (Le Guin 82). This lack of governmental power and control enables the Anarresti to live and work in stability, harmony, and coordination. Furthermore, Anarres is a “barren” moon with barely any vegetation (Le Guin 41). These geographical characteristics lead critic John Fekete to conclude that this is why anarchism is possible; the harsh environment forces the Anarresti to work together and rely on one another to ensure their survival (135). While Fekete’s conclusion is indeed true, it raises a question about whether Anarres actually runs on the wheels of anarchism.

The depiction of the relationship between Shevek and Sabul at the Central Institute of the Sciences proves the answer to be a negative one. It shows that even utopia can be flawed. The exaggerated virtue of solidarity and the constant pressure for social stability on Anarres have not only given “scope to the authoritarian impulse” but also undermined individual freedom and differences (Le Guin 140). In the first instance, after Sabul works his way towards a reputable position in the Institute by stealing credit for his students’ research, he becomes the Press Syndicate’s consultant, who decides what type of physicist papers can be published on Anarres. This social responsibility “evoke[s] the dark side of human nature”, and in this case, it is Sabul’s desire for power that it awakens (Kumar 100). When he senses that Shevek’s Theory of Simultaneity, due to its crucial breakthrough and huge contribution to the field of physics, can potentially threaten his noble position at the Institute, Sabul deems it inappropriate to get it either published on Anarres or sent to Urras, unless he can be its co-author (Le Guin 99). This hypocrisy shows that, far from maintaining social harmony on Anarres, the idea of social stability actually allows Sabul to deny Shevek’s intellectual differences and to exercise his power at the expense of social and individual development.

Exploring how these social issues on Anarres undermine individual freedom and differences, Carter Hanson argues that “for a society seeking to maximise individual choice and responsibility, a surprising lack of ideological plurality on Anarres causes Odo[’s] political theories to be taught in a monologic way” (255). He attributes the lack of ‘ideological plurality’ to the Anarresti’s relinquishing their personal differences to conform to conventional behaviour. This argument can be elaborated further by examining Shevek’s response to Sabul’s hypocrisy: “if I want to

work I have to work with him" (Le Guin 99). This answer indicates that Shevek is blinded by Anarresti customs of sustaining social harmony. He fears "being outcast, being called [...] dysfunctional"; he fears his "neighbour's opinion more than [he] respect[s] his own freedom of choice" (Le Guin 272). In other words, Shevek strongly believes that to work independently is to cause disturbance to the Institute and Anarresti society and to break the social pattern that makes this society free, co-dependent, and harmonious. This deep-seated belief causes Shevek to dismiss his differences and freedom in "do[ing] anything" (Le Guin 108). He allows Sabul to be "a dominance-seeker, a profiteer" and eventually forsakes his intellectual potential and passion for physics and signs up for labour jobs in areas that need his help (Le Guin 99). This decision demonstrates that "[social] stability rules the Odonian society by stifling the individual mind" and that the Production Distribution Committee has now, ironically, become "an archistic bureaucracy" (Le Guin 138-9).

After portraying the dynamics of the relationship between Shevek and Sabul in a way that ultimately interrogates the flaws in Anarresti utopian society, Le Guin reveals that Shevek's earlier conformity to social norms, his relinquishing of his freedom, and his ignorance of Sabul's hypocrisy, are part of a larger problem. That is, the Anarresti's refusal of change. This larger problem is clearly manifested in Bedap's forthright statement about Odonianism: it "has got rigid, moralistic, authoritarian" (Le Guin 140). These three adjectives convey a strong sense of a social system going downhill due to rigidity: as the Anarresti rely heavily on the principles of social stability, they are overfond of making moral judgments about individual choices, of which Shevek is a victim. This makes way for power-seekers like Sabul to manipulate this moralism to become authoritarian, because after all "human nature is human nature" and "the will to dominance is as central in human beings as the impulse to mutual aid is" (Le Guin 60 and 140). Anarres serves as a critical response to both utopian tradition and anti-utopia. By ignoring individual differences, Anarres falls into the state of uniformity in Wells's utopia; by refusing to change, it shares with More's perfected utopia the risk of stagnating; and by becoming static, it makes its way towards the political system of Urras, a centralised and totalitarian government to which utopia would often succumb in dystopian fiction (Goodwin and Taylor 111).

In an attempt to fix these problems, Le Guin proposes that if Anarresti society is to keep the promise of anarchism, that is, the promise of individual freedom and

social harmony, its individual members must consider individual differences and constant change essential elements for it. This idea is vividly demonstrated in Shevek's moment of recognition:

> He recognised th[e] need [to be himself], in Odonian terms, as his "cellular function," the analogic term for the individual's individuality, the work he can do best, therefore his best contribution to his society. A healthy society would let him exercise that optimum function freely, in the coordination of all such functions finding its adaptability and strength. That was the central idea of Odos Analogy. [...] Sacrifice might be demanded of the individual, but never compromise: for though only the society could give security and stability, only the individual, the person, had the power of moral choice? the power of change, the essential function of life. The Odonian society was conceived as a permanent revolution, and revolution begins in the thinking mind. (274)

This recognition is in accordance with Krishan Kumar's observation that "either revolution was permanent and pervasive, transforming every life as much as political structures, or it was no revolution" (401). This observation, along with Shevek's realisation, conveys and illuminates Le Guin's final proposal of a dynamic utopia: while solidarity and cooperation are essential for social harmony, only by embracing differences and adapting to changing circumstances and continually reinventing the social organism that is society can utopia be created and sustained.

To allow readers to grasp this proposal more fully, Le Guin expounds it through her concept of time, which she has embedded in Shevek's General Temporal Theory. What this theory conveys is the idea that not only time can be experienced as both Sequency and Simultaneity but "the same actions can [also] be seen from two different points of view" (Jaeckle 80). Le Guin's important statement – "you *can* go home again [...] so long as you understand that home is a place where you have never been" – expresses her two different viewpoints on the act of fulfilling a promise (48). In this statement, home is a metonym for the promise of anarchism, while going home is a metonym for fulfilling the promise. On the one hand, the moment Odo promises her followers freedom and harmony, its fulfilment indicates a sequence of time, just as going home does. On the other, the moment the promise is fulfilled, it must be experienced simultaneously as though it has not been. Whereas the first view bespeaks progression, the second indicates that Le Guin does not see a promise being fulfilled as "an end" in and of itself because, in so doing, society will eventually fall into a state of

stasis (175). Rather, she believes that, as the search for utopia "comes to the end" it "has to start over" by adapting and reinventing itself, for "it is not a journey and return, but a closed cycle, a locked room, a cell" that sees no perfect end goal and thereby ensures both continual progression and social enrichment (Le Guin 175).

If the dystopian world Urras and the ambiguous utopian society Anarres in *The Dispossessed* are located on two separate planets, readers see in Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* the presence of dystopia and utopia in the same world. While the utopian society of the Gardeners occupies an abandoned factory, outside their protective shield is the dystopian environment of late capitalism: the Compounds of the Corps people. In describing the latter, Atwood—like Le Guin—holds up a grotesque mirror to reality. Her purpose is to show that, although the novel is fictional, "the general tendencies and many of the details in it are alarmingly close to fact" (Atwood, *The Year* 521). This dystopian world contains myriad representations of insatiable human greed. For example, people's desire for a more youthful look, more pleasurable sex, and a longer life is indicated in trade names such as AnooYoo, SeksMart, and Cryojeenyus (Rúa 160). These companies genetically engineer nonhuman animals in a way that allows the former to harvest the latter's body parts and organs not only to enhance humans' beauty and health but also to increase their economic wealth. This is evident in the existence of the Mo'sHairs, which are originally sheep that are then genetically spliced with humans to provide hair extensions, and of the Pigoons, which are pigs whose purpose we learn from the prequel *Oryx and Crake* (2003) by Atwood is to "grow an assortment of foolproof human-tissue organs in a transgenic knockout pig host—organs that would transplant smoothly and avoid rejections" (*Oryx* 27-8). This exploitation of nonhuman animals is further demonstrated in images of restaurants like Rarity, where endangered animals are served, and the cheap hamburger chain SecretBurgers, where the ironical secret is that "no one knew what sort of animal protein was actually in them" (Atwood, *The Year* 39). Similar to Le Guin's depiction of A-Io, these numerous genetic engineering projects of the Corps, which do not stray far from the real world's ongoing research in biotechnology, stands as a piece of direct criticism against humans' rampant consumerism and dreams of avarice.

But while A-Io is controlled by the state, the dystopian world in Atwood's novel is run completely by corporations, which serves to emphasise further the ideological similarity between the Compounds and real society. Real-life capitalist countries today

are mostly controlled by corporate interests. As journalist George Monbiot puts it, "corporate interests have captured the entire democratic process" (n.pg). To lament the gradual loss of democracy in the contemporary world and to portray this bitter reality, Atwood describes the Corps people as holding a power that no one can withstand. This is demonstrated by multiple scenes where, whenever the MaddAddam group is involved in environmental activism against corporate businesses, they and the Gardeners are wiped out immediately by the private police force CorpSeCorps (Atwood, *The Year* 327). In the same way that Le Guin portrays Urras, Atwood depicts the Compounds in a way that ultimately criticises the absolute power of late capitalism, whereby humans are deranged and natural resources are exhausted. As Chris Ferns observes, "dystopian fiction posits a society which – however outlandish – is clearly extrapolated from that which exists" (107).

Given the parallels between how real society has been run and the way the Corps people in *The Year* exert power over the state, the natural world and human inhabitants, Atwood intends to devise a utopia that can inspire hope, effect change, and reverse the status quo. In an interview with *The Telegraph*, she asserts that "we seem to be hard-wired to have a belief system of some kind" (n.pg). This is why, to offer her readers "a belief system of some kind", one that could help them overcome the pessimism caused by ecological crisis and socio-political issues that often boil down to the rapacity of corporations, Atwood creates a narrative for the God's Gardeners whose community is founded on their belief in God. This belief originates in the Human Words of God, which gave Noah "the task of saving the chosen Species" (Atwood, *The Year* 108). Due to "the waters of the Flood" his Ark was destroyed and "the rescued Creatures were set loose upon the Earth" (Atwood, *The Year* 108-9). As the leader of the Gardeners, Adam One shares the belief that these creatures are the ones God "bequeathed anew to [the Gardeners'] care" and assigns his community the responsibility for protecting them within their capacity: "we God's Gardeners are a plural Noah" (Atwood, *The Year* 108 and 110). Following Adam One's lead, the Gardeners dedicate their lives to "an alternative lifestyle of vegetarianism, low-technology, nonviolence, and survivalism" (Snyder 19). Each individual member helps one another cultivate the EdenCliff Rooftop Garden, where – in the same way that the Anarresti society is depicted – they live in harmony and self-sufficiency. That Atwood integrates her idea of spirituality into her construction of the God's Gardeners' society offers her readers not only a belief

system that "precedes action" but also an alternative way of life more favourable than the world of the Corps (Atwood, *The Year* 203).

In addition to promoting the idea of faith preceding action, Atwood advocates the idea of "action preced[ing] faith" (Atwood, *The Year* 203). This is shown in the scene where Toby refuses to become Eve Six because she does not believe in Adam One's religion. Confronting this situation, Adam One convinces her that "in some religions, faith precedes action [...] In ours, action precedes faith" (Atwood, *The Year* 202-3). Although at first sight one might think that Atwood is contradicting herself, this short statement actually contains her two important messages. On the one hand, it serves to uncover the reciprocal relationship between faith and action. If one believes in God and the possibility of a healthier world without taking action to achieve it, change would not take place. In the same manner, if one keeps taking action for no particular purpose – for example, in *Open City* (2011), author Teju Cole describes his protagonist Julius as "only ever recycle[ing] out of convenience, not out of some belief that recycling made a real difference" – the action would not lead to meaningful results (198). On the other hand, if one keeps making change, knowing that their contribution is useful in creating a utopia, this would "[precede] faith" in positive change, though not necessarily in God. Marinette Grimbeek's argument that "the focus of the Gardeners' doctrine is on practice, rather than faith" therefore risks undermining Atwood's dynamic view of faith and action (154). For it encourages not just the Gardeners but also readers to see that both factors are crucially important to the creation of utopia. As Toby later admits, "she didn't really believe in their creed, but she no longer disbelieved. [...] Toby felt she would never encounter anyone as strong in purpose as [Adam One]" (Atwood, *The Year* 117-8).

Atwood's second message, which states that "action precedes faith", lies further in the demythologisation of religion, as Adam One creates his own version of it, illustrated by the possessive pronoun "ours". This demythologisation of religion emphasises Atwood's promotion of change and adaptability, just as Le Guin advocates in her novel. For instance, Adam One reinterprets the Fall of Man as "multidimensional [in which] [t]he ancestral primates fell out of the trees; then they fell from vegetarianism into meat-eating. Then they fell from instinct into reason, and thus into technology. [...] The Fall was ongoing, but its trajectory led ever downward" (Atwood, *The Year* 226). Adam One condemns meat-eating and technology, yet he believes that

humans can still consume meat if they are starving; at the same time, the Adams and Eves own a laptop. These contraventions lead critic Raymond Malewitz to argue that "this eco-advocacy does not depart from the conditions of late capitalism so much as it emerges from them" (534). However, Malewitz misses the point that this is Adam One's appropriation of religion, which has been made to adapt to transient circumstances and to sustain his community. As humans face starvation, they will instinctively strive for survival, and in this case, meat-eating is not only acceptable but also unavoidable. In addition, unlike Anarresti society becoming resistant to change, as seen in its continued isolating itself from other nations (Le Guin 62), the Adams and Eves acclimatise to their situation and make use technology to store "crucial data pertaining to the Exfernal World" instead of rejecting it completely (Atwood, *The Year* 227). This storage of data helps protect their community and enables it to grow "in influence" (Atwood, *The Year* 228). Instead of seeing God as a perfect figure as traditional religious utopia does (McCord 183), the Gardeners see Him as "the No-thingness" (Atwood, *The Year* 62) and a spirit subject to change or, as writer Octavia Butler puts it, "God is Change", because only by doing so can they sustain their social harmony and development (3).

Besides this notion of change, Atwood, like Le Guin, suggests that the acceptance of individual differences and human flaws is another crucial aspect in achieving social stability and concord. However, while Le Guin conceives this aspect through the act of promising, Atwood does so via that of forgiveness. This is illustrated in the scene where Burt Adam Thirteen secretly runs a grow-op in the Buenavista and gets caught by the CorpSeCorps for selling and making profit on his own (Atwood, *The Year* 208). In so doing, not only does Burt break the community's trust in him and put it at risk from the Corps, but he also gives the enemy the chance to forfeit the Buenavista, one of the valuable buildings that the Gardeners occupy. Despite the danger this incident posed to his community's members, Adam One encourages them to "put Light around Burt in their hearts" and to "pity rather than condemn" him, for he is just "a victim seduced by the spirit of materialist greed" (Atwood, *The Year* 230-1). This act of forgiveness indicates that Adam One does not want to undermine his community's stability and integrity amidst the Corps' threat (Atwood, *The Year* 231). Significantly, by forgiving Burt, he also promotes compassion and empathy and helps the Gardeners recognise the inescapable nature of human flaws, only through the

understanding and acceptance of which can social harmony and stability be achieved and maintained.

Both Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* and Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* each provide a version of a utopia via their depictions of Anarres and the Gardeners' community. To justify their societal models, the authors satirise the flaws in the political and socio-economic structures of capitalism and do so through their grotesque portrayals of Urras and the Compounds of the Corps people. Moreover, writing in the genre of critical utopia, they forcefully refuse to conceive utopia as already perfected. Their concepts of time and spirituality allow them to propose new ways of understanding and constructing utopias, ones that can see how human nature is flawed and so are all utopias if change and individual differences are dismissed. This is because, for them, these factors play a vital role in helping sustain and enrich society. Via this message, both authors clearly raise hope for a better way of life and show that they do believe in the possibility of utopia. For if they have accepted "the failure of Utopia" as Hughes claims, the novels would not have been written in the first place, and so as Atwood declares, "it is better to hope than to mope!" (Atwood, *The Year* 107).

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Photo: Duarte Amaral Netto

Black Mirror's "Fifteen Million Merits": Re-Defining Human Bodies with Dystopian Technology

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Abstract | Two seasons of the British television show *Black Mirror*, created by Charlie Brooker, aired on Channel 4 between 2011 and 2013, and three further seasons have been released by the streaming service Netflix since 2016. The show holds a unique fascination since it depicts a nearby future that seems almost graspable by demonstrating dystopian developments of today's technologies and technological platforms. "Dystopian" refers here to a dark version of a possible future in fiction. Further, it also reflects on our present struggles in society. Accordingly, Laurence Davis defines "dystopian" as a "satire on existing society with a parodic inversion of transcendent or controlling utopian aspirations" (26). In a similar manner, this anthology series reflects upon human dependency on technology in the format of an unsettling and anxiety-inducing dark television drama.

Essentially, *Black Mirror* highlights what it means to be *human* in our digital times. In the context of the impact of digital technologies, the episode “Fifteen Million Merits” indicates a dark vision of the contemporary state of humanity. Arguably, this episode highlights the status of human bodies as commodities in a dystopian, technological environment. In the narrative, human bodies and the “dopple” bicycles become interconnected by creating new spaces of signification. Consequently, mind/body as well as human/non-human binaries become blurry. This analysis will investigate the breakdown of such binaries as well as the accelerating interdependence of humans and their technologies in a posthuman and anti-capitalist reading.

Keywords | Black Mirror, Fifteen Million Merits, dystopia, satire, science fiction, posthuman.

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Resumo | O programa de televisão britânico *Black Mirror*, criado por Charlie Brooker, com duas temporadas no Canal 4 entre 2011 e 2013, e mais três lançadas no serviço de *streaming* Netflix desde 2016, tem um fascínio único, uma vez que retrata um futuro próximo que parece quase alcançável ao demonstrar desenvolvimentos distópicos das tecnologias e plataformas tecnológicas atuais. "Distópico" refere-se aqui a uma versão sombria de um futuro possível na ficção. Além disso, reflete-se também nas nossas lutas atuais em sociedade. Em conformidade, Laurence Davis define "distópico" como uma "sátira sobre a sociedade existente com uma inversão paródica das aspirações utópicas aspirações transcendentes controladoras" (26). De forma semelhante, esta série antológica reflete sobre a dependência humana da tecnologia, no formato de um drama televisivo sombrio inquietante e indutor de ansiedade.

Essencialmente, *Black Mirror* destaca o que significa ser *humano* no nosso tempo digital. No contexto do impacto das tecnologias digitais, o episódio "*Fifteen Million Merits*" aponta uma visão sombria do estado contemporâneo da humanidade. Pode-se argumentar que este episódio realça o estatuto dos corpos humanos como mercadorias num ambiente distópico e tecnológico. Na narrativa, os corpos humanos e as bicicletas "dopple" tornam-se interligados, criando novos espaços de significação. Consequentemente, as relações binárias mente/corpo, bem como humano/não-humano, tornam-se indistintas. Esta análise investigará a rutura de tais conceitos binários, bem como a interdependência acelerada dos seres humanos e das suas tecnologias numa leitura pós-humana e anticapitalista.

Palavras-chave | *Black Mirror*, *Fifteen Million Merits*, distopia, sátira, ficção científica, pós-humano

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Technological Anxieties, Consumers and the Cold Screen

Kevin Kelly, editor of *WIRED Magazine*, observes that "more than 5 billion digital screens illuminate our lives" (86). He perceives contemporary Western societies today as "the People of the Screen," an idea which is certainly picked up by *BM* (Kelly 86). *Black Mirror* creates an uncanny feeling of fear and confusion in a quickly changing, technological world. The title and intro of the show indicates this anxiety by pointing out the fragility of screen technologies. Each episode of the show opens with a flickering of the letters "Black Mirror" as they slowly form the title. The words "black mirror" can here be interpreted as a reflection of fears towards technology in current and future (Western) societies. Afterwards, a crack appears, recreating the visual of a splintered screen. In an attempt to break the fourth wall, it seems as if the screen of the viewer is shattered (1:01:55-1:01:40).[1]Thus, the show as broken, dark, twisted and, to a certain extent, imperfect. Charlie Brooker, the creator of the show, describes this "black mirror" as one "you'll find on every wall, on every desk, in the palm of every hand: the cold, shiny screen of a TV, a monitor, a smartphone" ("Charlie Brooker: the Dark Side of our Gadget Addiction" n.pg.). Thereby, the intro already foreshadows the possibility of a damaged and irreparably changed human interaction with digital technology.

The show itself envisions a very near future where human life is brimming over with, and arguably dependent upon technology. It recreates the anxieties with regards to the impact of our digital technologies and provides a glimpse into a possible technological future. The implication seems to be that humans, once used to the omnipresence of technological devices, will become unable to function without them. As this analysis will demonstrate, the episode "Fifteen Million Merits" especially underlines how the show represents a dark, satiric version of the contemporary state of humanity. This episode in particular confronts the fragility of human morality and their dependency of technological objects. By breaking down the binaries between humans and technologies, the show and this episode highlight *interconnections*. This characteristic makes the show "posthuman," since it moves beyond what can be

[1] The timestamps for the various *Black Mirror* episodes are running backwards, following the indicated time on *Netflix*.

perceived as being human (Braidotti 90). “Fifteen Million Merits” achieves this mainly by introducing a re-defined human body.

Katherine N. Hayles defines the posthuman as a theory that emphasizes that there are “no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals” (2-3). Accordingly, Rosi Braidotti asserts that the posthuman concerns the transgression of binaries between human and non-human, between subject and object, between mind and body (90). For David R. Lawrence this move away from a traditional human-centered philosophy symbolizes leaving humanity behind (171). However, as this analysis will demonstrate, the posthuman acknowledges the agency of humans while also investigating the role of digital technologies in our world.

The deconstruction of binaries between humans and technologies oppose the alleged Cartesian mind-body divide. René Descartes famously argued that the body is merely “shape and motion” and unrelated from the “nature of the mind” (86). The posthuman opposes Cartesian dualism by stressing that humans find themselves in forms of “bodily entanglement with an environment” that requires a rethinking “of who and what we are” (Johnson 1). The second episode of the first season, “Fifteen Million Merits,” especially addresses this complication of what it means to be human in a technological environment. The episode demonstrates how humans are shaped through technology and technological processes that take place “within the entire body, not just the brain” (Pugh 5). Thus, the narrative positions human bodies appears as entangled technological spaces.

The first scene already situates the body of the character Bing in such a space. Alongside Abi Khan, Bingham Madsen is one of the main characters of the episode. It is important to note that he is the only non-white character, which accentuates his designated role as the outsider throughout the episode. The episode begins with a wide shot of Bing, who is sleeping on a bed (1:01:24-1:00:12). Everything is dark around him, until, suddenly, the room manifests itself as a space filled with screens, which begin to light up. The screens show a cartoonish, animated landscape with a farm, a rising sun and a crowing rooster. Bing Madsen opens his eyes and examines the screen. An avatar version of himself pops up and four words appear on the screen: “signing in, please wait” (1:00:46). His avatar has a score of fifteen million merits, giving the episode its title. Bing uses these “merits” to pay for the use of applications on the screen,

food items and hygiene products. On the screen, the virtual body of an avatar is introduced in addition to the human body of Bing. This separation between the virtual body and the physical body demonstrates the how technology infiltrates his life. The virtual avatar on the screen anticipates his physical actions and needs immediately.

For instance, he when he proceeds to his bathroom, a porn advertisement for a show called "Wraith Babes" pops up in his bathroom mirror-screen: "New: from "Wraith Babes," the hottest girls in the nastiest situations" (00:59:56-00:59:48). Naked and almost-naked women can be seen in compromising positions. In *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, Paul Preciado reflects upon the ubiquity of (sexualized) bodies through technology which "infiltrate and penetrate daily life like never before" in representations such as cinema, cybernetics, videogames, and television (77). Thus, this moment in "Fifteen Million Merits" indicates that from the first scene onward, physical human and non-human bodies or virtual avatars as well as sexualized bodies are at the focus of the narrative.

Donna Haraway already foretold in the year 2000 that "[c]ommunication technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools redrafting our bodies" (302). Appearing over and over throughout the episode on various screen surfaces, the advertisement of the pornographic show "Wraith Babes" indicates the overwhelming presence of such communication technologies. The objective of the advertisement is to portray sexualized bodies as desirable. However, Bing decides to cancel the pornographic advertisement with a gesture of his hand. Skipping advertisements on the daylight stream incurs a penalty in merits (00:53:02-00:52:54). Additionally, if Bing closes his eyes to avoid seeing an advertisement, a high-pitched noise occurs, and a woman's voice advises him to "resume viewing" (00:52:40-00:52:25). The screen perceives what he is doing; it *interacts* and punishes. Moreover, it especially impedes and controls his body by forcing him to watch.

Bing could also choose to watch "Wraith Babes," which would result in a loss of merits. Both the punishment and the decision to watch result in a loss of merits. He is part of a capitalistic merit-system. In this context, it is crucial to thus recognize capitalism as a human-centered or anthropocentric mode of production which thrives on binaries or differences. Digital technologies are here enabling profit and exploitation of Bing and his body. This anti-capitalist reading of the narrative touches upon the posthuman. Accordingly, Rob Wilkie interprets the focus of the posthuman as "a

response to the alienation of labor under capitalism, but it does not provide an alternative to it" (139). However, posthuman readings are indeed helpful to introduce new perspectives on the position of technologies in our world. While technology is often used to benefit a capitalist mode of production, it may develop independently from capitalist structures in the future. For Wilkie it seems difficult to envision a world where humans establish a new form of posthuman identity. Similarly, "Fifteen Million Merits" explores the possibility of a future where humans function in an endless cycle of labor and empty rewards. In fact, this episode demonstrates that the twenty-first century is characterized by capitalist realism, or the sense that capitalism is the only economic system that is viable but that we can also not *imagine* a coherent alternative to it (Fisher 2). Indeed, the episode explores our self-inflicted doom of the capitalist system.

Several aspects of the episode highlight the capitalist characteristics of the technological environment. For instance, in his daily routine, Bing rides on a stationary bike called "dopple" to earn merits in a huge facility which seems to only consist of humans riding on dopples (00:59:01-00:58:05). On the screens in front of their dopples, the riders can watch shows such as "Bothergut," the talent show "Hot Shot," ride down a virtual "Rolling Road," watch the porn show "Wraith Babes," or learn how to play instruments like the violin (00:58:23-00:58:05). Thereby, human bodies and the dopple bicycles become interconnected by creating a whole new space of signification (Pugh 3). They resemble a gigantic factory of riders or laborers.

However, the utility of the riding remains unclear. The entertainment which is bought on the screens via the mentioned apps do not seem to have any utility other than superficial satisfaction. Further, the games also evoke a hierarchical order in the dopple facility. The shooter game "Brothergut" for instance invites the riders to bully, beat or shoot at the facility's cleaning staff. The riders function as mindless consumers while upholding established hierarchies and differences. Accordingly, Etienne Balibar criticizes how the use of technology by humans often assigns "intellectual hierarchies" and thrives in mass consumption (27). This evokes a comparison to a capitalist system which thrives on class differences and the exploitation of the working class.

Furthermore, the riders actively use their bodies to access this technology. In fact, their bodies are exploited to access meaningless entertainment. In fact, the bodies of the riders appear in a sort of "abstracted incorporeality" (Massumi 21). This abstraction

of human bodies is especially emphasized when the riders access the talent show "Hot Shot" on the screens. This show consists of the humans acting as a virtual audience with the only exception of the non-virtual judges. An advertisement of the show introduces images of a cheering virtual audience and proclaims: "You decide the victors. You control their fate" (00:53:10-00:53:06). The promise of the show is to enable winners with their own "tempo content" on one of the "eight daylight streams" (00:53:50-00:53:46). Thereby, "Hot Shot" is underscoring the invasiveness of capitalism in the dystopian dopple environment. It also breaks down the binaries between virtual and physical bodies.

Further, "Hot Shot" points out another important characteristic of "Fifteen Million Merits," namely its meta-discursive self-referentiality which alludes and references other media formats (Sola and Martínez-Lucena 5). "Hot Shot" re-mediates the well-known format of a talent show. Additionally, the entire episode is very reminiscent of a colorful video game since humans ride their "dopples" to add more merits to their accounts, in the same manner as a player collects tokens or trophies. They also live out their fantasies in virtual bodies. In this context, it is important to take the insights of the media theorist Marshall McLuhan into consideration in order to realize *how* the episode treats different media formats (apps, television shows, games). According to Nicholas Carr, "McLuhan understood that whenever a media format is invented and introduced to society, people naturally get caught up in the information—the 'content'—it carries" (2). The tech writer, influenced by the theories of McLuhan, interprets such formats as windows to the world and ourselves (3). Such formats can change "who we are, as individuals and as a society" (3). Carr appeals to the effects of media formats on humans, an approach which is also imperative to this analysis.

In "Fifteen Million Merits," apps are constantly used and consumed by the dopple riders. Their bodily motion produces more merits and initiates an endless cycle of riding and app usage. Thus, their bodies are central to enable their dystopian technological environments. McLuhan also introduced the idea of "cold" media which requires a "high participation or completion by the audience" (2003, 3). McLuhan describes it as the alluring power of technology to "create its own world of demand" which is foremost "an extension of our own bodies and senses" (2000, 15). In this regard, the screens on the doppels can be designated as "cold" screens (McLuhan 2003, 39). The "cold" screen enables the dopple riders to access another world entirely. The riders focus on the

content of the apps and do not critically engage with the utility of the dopples. They do not question whether they have to ride their dopples and for what. Instead, they seem entirely absorbed and distracted from critical inquiry.

Machines and Humans: "Powering What?"

The episode later reveals that the humans riding on the dopples are in fact powering the facility that they find themselves in. On "Hot Shot," the character Judge Hope explains: "Who do you think is powering that spotlight? Millions of people, that's who, all of 'em out there right now, putting in an honest day at the bike" (00:24:54-24:34). This uncovering of the utility of bike-riding blurs the distinction between the human body and the "dopple" machine. Indeed, such an explanation positions these bodies as *posthuman*. The humans power the technologies that they indulge in. This opens up the question whether their physical power might be the only reliable power resource that is available. In this context, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen observes how we treat the world as "an inexhaustible resource" and suggest that we should "refashion our relations to materiality and objects" (58). The eco-critic calls for action in a world that is threatened by climate change. Therefore, the episode can also be read as a critical comment on human waste of resources.

It becomes almost impossible to escape the vicious circle of the bike riding and the permanent flickering of the screens, powered by an unseen mass. All of the humans riding their dopples appear as "one." In a capitalistic system, these humans are replaceable since their only goal is to maintain their physical health. Accordingly, in George Orwell's famous dystopian work *1984*, the character Winston observes that "[n]othing was your own except the few cubic centimeters inside your skull" (27). This aspect also makes "Fifteen Million Merits" highly comparable to movie franchises like *The Matrix,* where human enslavement of bodies enables machines to run. The dopples cannot power the building without human energy. A different type of bodily feeling is thus created. Bodies enable electricity while the objects that help to generate this energy become relied upon. An inter-dependency between humans and technological objects (dopples) emerges. Again, the differences between machines and non-machines appear blurry; crossing the binaries of the human and the non-human, the subject and the object. This does not, however, mean that humans and technology become the *same,*

but evokes to the question: can a body leave this premediated framework of human-technology intertwinement?

Stephen David Ross makes an interesting comparison of the human self to "a body machine, producing machine, desiring, recording, expressing machine" (263). Without explicitly referring to them, Ross remarks can be compared to what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of "the desiring-machine" (2). They state: "There is no such thing as either man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other and couples the machines together" (1-2). The desiring-machine describes how desire is produced within human beings. Accordingly, Karl Marx defines desire as a fuel to the objectification or commodification of a thing (143). This process can be applied to *BM* as a whole and "Fifteen Million Merits," which emphasizes the production of desire as a common human experience. While the bodies in "Fifteen Million Merits" produce energy to keep the system alive, they also find themselves trapped by their desire to collect millions of merits. This desire is constantly renewed within a framework of body politics and peer motivation in a feedback loop. At the same time, energy is produced to keep the system alive. Again this desire to consume invites a comparison to a dominance of capitalism as a mode of production.

Attempting to Resist Body-Machine Interdependencies

The episode also implies that human behavior changes due to the routine of interacting with dull technology such as the dopple. It makes the user passive, unaware and willing to get entirely lost in the content of the screen in front of them. This is especially demonstrated in the narrative with the experience of Abi Khan, the other main character in this episode. She is a shy but quite talented singer who proceeds to compete in the show "Hot Shot" with the help and support of Bing. Throughout the episode, his romantic interest in Abi becomes explicit. This becomes particularly clear when Bing gifts her 15 million merits so she can enter the singing contest. Abi reluctantly accepts Bing's offer. It becomes obvious that they like each other, exchanging smiles and joking regularly about the world or system they are a part of.

At "Hotshot," Abi performs Irma Thomas's "Anyone Who Knows What Love Is (Will Understand)" from 1964. She describes the song as a "hand-me-down" in her family, a nostalgic piece of a bygone past and an attempt to retrieve something like authenticity in a technologically dominated space (00:42:02-00:42:01). However, the

song only seems "authentic" since it is in fact a copy of an older song; nothing more than a nostalgic reminder of a more organic or even less capitalist past. The song can be contrasted to the emphasis on bodily production and passive exploitation. It expresses Abi's willingness to resist body-machine interdependencies.

Thus, the characters of this episode constantly strive for something "real." Bing expresses this desire by stating: "I just want something real to happen. Just once" (00:39:35-00:39:26). Love especially is portrayed as enabling access to this "realness." Abi therefore sings: "The world may think I'm foolish, they can't see you like I can. Oh, but anyone who knows what love is will understand," which bears symbolical meaning since love cannot be consumed or materialized (00:48:57-00:48:21). This episode is essentially opposing the authentic, "real" love of Bing and Abi to the highly constructed, virtual environment around them. By introducing the distinction between the authentic love and technological or virtual environment, dualisms are enforced. By striving to obtain authenticity through love, the main characters' actions oppose the intertwinement of human bodies with technology. Humans stand out as beings that are able to love while the machines are not.

However, after Abi's performance at "Hot Shot," the judges and the virtual crowd push her to become a porn star, an audience demand to which she eventually complies. Judge Hope tells Abi that she performed "the best piece of singing we've had this season," but that he "couldn't help" picturing Abi in an erotic scenario (00:26:55-26:44). Abi's facial expression seems frozen with shock when the judge expresses his admiration for her "pure beauty" which also has an "interesting innocence going on" (00:26:34-00:26:28). Thereby, she is objectified and reduced to a sexualized object. The presence of sexism at the talent show can be explained by "Western science and politics — the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism" (Haraway 292). The entire crowd chants, pushing her to "do it," and finally she breaks down from the hive-mind peer pressure and complies to their wishes to "do it" to become a porn star in the show "Wraith Babes" (00:23:58-00:23:24). Thus, again, the humans in "Fifteen Million Merits" are depicted as an unquestioning, collective unit.

This portrayal of Abi as someone who gives into peer pressure is important since it demonstrates the transformation of her body into "a kind of private satisfaction- and utility-maximizing machine" (Haraway 306). Additionally, she is seduced by the opportunity to escape the everyday routine of riding a dopple. Judge Wraith persuades

her: “You will never have to pedal again, not one minute! (…) Forget about all the shame (…) we medicate against that. You will have pleasure forever” (00:25:58-00:25:05). The drugging of Abi’s body emphasizes its function as an instrument while stripping her agency. The sexualization of Abi’s body makes her an object in an environment in which individuals are constantly objectified. By pushing her to perform as a porn actress, female bodies thus become “objects of desire” in the narrative (Hennessey 100). Accordingly, in his capitalist critique, Theodor Adorno observes that humans live in a “pleasure-loving society” where people are always aiming to fulfill their desires instantly (61). In the context of “Fifteen Million Merits,” the technology allows the consumer to enjoy pleasures and to consume endlessly without the necessity of moderation.

Abi’s performances as a porn star appear on the screens surrounding Bing. In fact, he is even forced to watch her first performance in his little “screen cubicle” living space. Abi’s face appears on every screen. No matter which way he turns he cannot escape it. Unable to look away, in a sudden burst of anger, he destroys the screens around him. Following his mental breakdown, Bing decides to re-enter the “Hot Shot” contest in an attempt to overthrow the system. After saving enough credits to participate, he appears at the show. He disrupts the routine of the passive audience and attracts the attention of the judges by threatening to kill himself on stage with a piece of glass. Ironically, this piece of glass originates from a screen in his cubicle, demonstrating his wish to literally cut himself off from the dependence to the screen.

Bing begins a speech, declaring that “I wanted you to listen. To really listen, not just pull a face like you’re listening, like you do the rest of the time” (00:09:42-00:09:37). Bing attacks his virtual audience for their artificiality and their processed and almost “programmed” behavior. Bing provocatively analyzes the fakeness of the audience around him: “all you see up here, it’s not people, you don’t see people up here, it’s all fodder. And the faker the fodder, the more you love it, because fake fodder's the only thing that works any more” (00:09:26-00:09:15). The audience’s joy with regards to the mistreatment of the shows competitors highlights the cruelty of the spectators. A common theme of *BM* is thus pointed out: humans appear or behave extremely artificial and emotionally distant.

Bing criticizes this behavior by critiquing the interdependence of human bodies and technologies as “augmented, packaged, and pumped through 10,000 preassigned

filters till it's nothing more than a meaningless series of lights" (00:08:30-00:08:11). It takes a minute for the crowd to react to Bing's outbreak, until Judge Hope declares: "That was without a doubt the most heartfelt thing I saw on this stage since 'Hot Shot' began" (00:07:17-00:07:05). He sees it as entertainment, a performance that one can profit from. Judge Hope adds: "And you're right, authenticity is in woefully short supply" and gives Bing a slot on one of his streams (00:06:19-00:06:14). Again, the crowd's pressure overwhelms a character who, until that point, seemed to be set on destroying the capitalist system around him. When Bing decides to perform a satiric show on the screen by giving similar speeches, he loses his agency and becomes part of his technological environment once again. Bing is stuck in his position within the capitalist system that surrounds him. He and his fellow peers forgo and are unaware of the possibilities of democratization via modern technologies but act instead as opportunists who disable this possibility.

Within his work *What is Posthumanism?,* Cary Wolfe's rightfully acknowledges the human as a "prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicality and materiality, forms that are radically "non-human" and yet have nevertheless made the human what it is" (xxv). This *BM* episode exposes what Wolfe designates as "the horrors of anthropocentrism" (xxx). Some of these horrors include human-technology interdependence, hive-mind and a consumerist, pleasure-loving economy based on merits. The dystopian narrative is creating awareness of the reality and downfalls of Western consumerist practices. The show demonstrates a shift in fiction towards a non-human future, a dystopian age where humans do not dominate technology but where instead technology might even control us humans. Technology and humans are thus fused together and are not regarded as separate entities. These fictional visions of the future emphasize the disparities and inequalities which are created by human abuses of technologies. *BM*'s "Fifteen Million Merits" points out how humans and technology *depend* on each other, and how humans have become unable to break out of their self-imposed systems.

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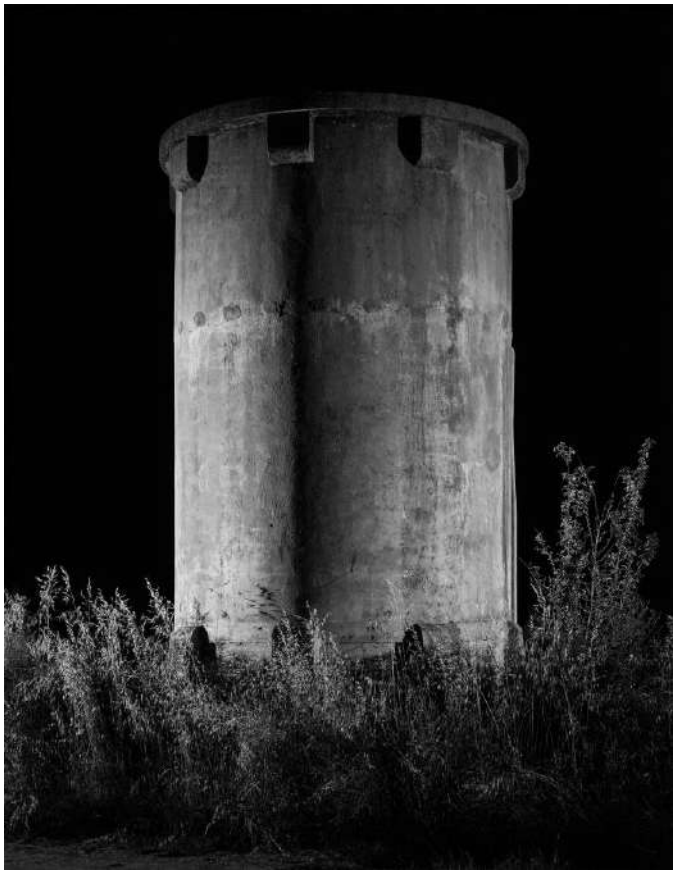

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"There are no heroes in Gotham": Subverting the Superhero Narrative and Depicting Dystopian Landscapes in *Gotham*.

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Abstract | The proposed essay explores how subverting the superhero narrative allows FOX's *Gotham* (2014-2019) an opportunity to develop the world of dystopia through its characters and themes. This essay will look at how *Gotham* achieves this dystopia through the use of setting, storyline, and character in order to portray two different dystopian narratives over the course of the show's five seasons. With a narrative that focuses on villains, *Gotham* presents a gritty realism to the story which allows it to reflect certain cultural fears and anxieties to its audience. The series establishes its dystopian landscapes through the use of a capitalist regime that offers an in-depth look at the corruption of power and places its storylines as an example of how that regime functions within the city of Gotham in order to present a capitalist ideology through its characters. This essay will draw parallels from the narrative arcs in *Gotham* to the events of 9/11 and examine how the show uses that iconography to present a dystopia that offers a sense of realism. It will conclude by demonstrating the success of *Gotham*

as a dystopia and examine how it presents alternatives to that dystopia within its narrative.

Keywords | Gotham; capitalism; dystopia; villains; ideology.

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Abstracto | El ensayo propuesto explora cómo subvertir la narrativa de superhéroes permite a Gotham (2014-2019) de FOX una oportunidad para desarrollar el mundo de la distopía a través de sus personajes y temas. Este ensayo analizará cómo Gotham logra esta distopía mediante el uso del escenario, la historia y el personaje para retratar dos narrativas distópicas diferentes en el transcurso de las cinco temporadas del programa. Con una narrativa que se centra en los villanos, Gotham presenta un realismo áspero a la historia que le permite reflejar ciertos miedos y ansiedades culturales a su audiencia. La serie establece sus paisajes distópicos a través del uso de un régimen capitalista que ofrece una mirada en profundidad a la corrupción del poder y coloca sus historias como un ejemplo de cómo ese régimen funciona dentro de la ciudad de Gotham para presentar una ideología capitalista a través de sus personajes. Este ensayo trazará paralelismos entre los arcos narrativos de Gotham y los eventos del 11 de septiembre y examinará cómo el programa usa esa iconografía para presentar una distopía que ofrece una sensación de realismo. Concluirá demostrando el éxito de Gotham como distopía y examinará cómo presenta alternativas a esa distopía dentro de su narrativa.

Palabras-clave | Gotham; capitalismo; distopía; villanos; ideología.

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Introduction

In the past ten years superhero television shows and films have become more popular. The demands for such stories expanded the genre and saturated the world of television and film like never before. In 2013, FOX created a show that would act as a prequel to Batman and take place in the fictional city of Gotham where Batman would one day prowl around as The Dark Knight (VanDerWerff n.pg). A year later, the first season of *Gotham* (2014-2019) aired on screen. This show tells the story of Detective Jim Gordon, played by Ben McKenzie, and how a city is responsible for the creation of not only Batman but more importantly the villains he goes up against in his later years. This show was produced as a joint venture between FOX and DC Entertainment, with Bruno Heller (*The Mentalist*, 2008-2015 and *Rome*, 2005-2007) brought in to develop and create the series. What sets *Gotham* apart from the wealth of other superhero shows on television today, including others in the DC universe such as *Arrow*

(2012-2020) and *Supergirl* (2015-), is that it does not have a leading superhero. *Gotham* has often been called "the superhero show without a superhero" (Dodds n.pg) because while the series does feature a very young Bruce Wayne (played by David Mazouz), he is not yet Batman. This series seems more content with telling the stories of this hero's villains and expanding on the sprawling world of Gotham City. This creative choice is one of the main reasons *Gotham* stands out amongst the many superhero shows on air today and this set up allows it to explore the world of dystopia in unique and interesting ways. By exploring how *Gotham* subverts the conventional superhero narrative, it will be argued that the series creates an in-depth dystopia for its characters and audience which allows the show to explore specific themes and ideologies that reflect upon cultural fears and anxieties of today's society. This discussion will look at how *Gotham* presents itself as a dystopian world by looking at setting, character and storylines in order to understand how the show utilises these to create a dystopian landscape for the audience. The discussion will then explore what this suggests about the future of the superhero genre as well as what this type of dystopia implies about society and the ideological framework it is built upon.

A dystopia "is a utopia that has gone wrong, or a utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society" (Gordin et al. 8). From the very beginning, it is clear that something has gone very wrong in Gotham. Jim Gordon is new in town and to the Gotham City Police Department (GCPD); as such he is an all-around 'do-it-by-the-book good guy'. He is everything audiences would expect from a blue-collar man fighting for justice in a lawless city. However, Gotham is more than lawless, it is chaotic and Gordon soon learns that trying to clean up the streets of Gotham will be harder than he thought: most of the police force are corrupt, gangs rule the streets and Gotham is a playground where people battle for power and status. The first episode ("Pilot") offers audiences a sense of gritty realism that parallels a typical cop drama such as *The Wire* (2002-2008) or *The Shield* (2002-2008) automatically allowing audiences to align this new depiction of Gotham as less of a comic book inspired show and more like a cop drama that just happens to have added sci-fi/fantasy elements to it. Christopher David has suggested that, "much post-modern cinematic narrative had been preoccupied with apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic, and dystopian fantasies that closely reflect aspects of our lived reality" (56). *Gotham* manages to achieve this by establishing itself as a crime drama in the first few episodes, offering glimpses at the dystopian elements of the show

before exploring those aspects in detail. Episode 3 is the first-time audiences are fully introduced to the fantasy element of the show ("The Balloonman") as a result, this episode sets up a parallel between what Christopher describes as our own lived reality and that of the dystopian reality the characters of Gotham find themselves in. This allows the show to tackle societal ideologies, exploring cultural fears and anxieties through its storylines.

The City

Gotham, a city that has been depicted in many comic books, films and video games over the years such as Christopher Nolan's *Batman Trilogy* (2005-2012) and *Batman: Arkham Knight* (2015), gets its most in-depth depiction yet in *Gotham*. Over the course of the five seasons, the show manages to offer a sprawling cityscape that is rich in detail and made to closely resemble New York City. The show is filled with overhead cityscape shots that emphasize the many skyscrapers and built-up urban landscapes in order to establish its influences from cities audiences would be familiar with. It has influences from a typical dystopian setting with "night-for-night shots and other dimly lit scenes reveal[ing] neon splashed cityscapes, rain, and snowstorms and doomed, duplicitous, amoral characters" (Pollard 173). The city of Gotham is not unlike from the New York City of Moore's *Watchmen* (1986-1987) which deals with storylines of corruption, greed and government control throughout its comic run (and in the 2009 film of the same name). The parallels between the storylines in *Gotham* and *Watchmen* are clearly evident, both offering a dystopian setting in which these narratives play out. The setting of the city is a crucial one in successfully depicting the dystopian world and both *Gotham* and *Watchmen* appear to be aligned in their depiction of a darker and gritty "superhero" world as a way to explore society's fears and anxieties through the depiction of their respective cities.

Throughout Gotham's many depictions there seems to be an established tradition of presenting the city through gritty and dark visuals of an urban landscape that can be seen not just most recently in Nolan's Gotham but also in Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) and even in *Batman: The Animated Series* (1995-1995). This widely accepted iconography for Gotham makes it an obvious choice for exploring the city as a dystopia, inspired by the gritty visuals of earlier Batman comics. *Gotham* employs the same techniques to present its own version of a dystopian Gotham, but over the

course of each season it explores this notion in greater depth, removing the character of Batman from the forefront of the story in order to fully immerse the audience in the city as dystopia.

Gotham manages to subvert many expected notions of the superhero genre to set itself apart from other superhero shows and offer a dystopian setting for the show which only seems fitting to the city that is home to Batman's many villains such as The Joker, The Penguin and The Riddler. When creating the show, "Heller's whole idea" revolved around "the story of a city more than the superhero who guards it" (VanDerWerff n.pg). By removing the added element of an actual superhero, it allows the city to take centre stage in this unfolding narrative. This, in its turn, shifts the focus from The Dark Knight fighting injustice to the regular blue-collar cops of the GCPD fighting injustice, subverting the superhero genre by placing the everyday man at the forefront of this story. McDowell has suggested "popular culture has often reflected currents and shifts in the zeitgeist and its supporting mythologies, and in this science fiction/fantasy genres are often in the vanguard" (25). The focus on the GCPD stirs iconography from 9/11 and all the firefighters, rescue crews and officers on the frontlines of that catastrophe, adding another element of realism to this dystopia and tapping into cultural fears and anxieties surrounding a day that has been described as "the day when everything changed" (Pollard. 5). From the first episode, *Gotham* is clear in its intention to create its dystopia that is heavily influenced by parallels to 9/11 so that a connection can be made between the show and the horror witnessed by society during the tragedy of 9/11. This is a way to offer a narrative that will have a realistic resonance with its audience.

The Protagonist

Focusing on Jim Gordon as an introduction into the world of *Gotham* should put him in the position of the show's hero and the writers seem to draw on western influences for Gordon as the cowboy figure character coming in to clean up a lawless town. This motif occurs in many superhero films such as *Iron Man* (2008) and *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011). Nonetheless, *Gotham* manages to subvert this by exploring how the city manages to corrupt Gordon rather than the influence Gordon has on Gotham. Audiences watch Gordon's development over the course of the show from a man who refused to kill Oswald Cobblepot/The Penguin (played by Robin Lord

Taylor) at the end of the first episode to a man who willingly shoots Theo Galavan (played by James Frain) and lets Penguin take the fall for his crime in order to stop Galavan's corruption in the streets of Gotham ("Worse Than a Crime"). This act of turning good guy Gordon into an anti-hero who is willing to kill the bad guy to clean up Gotham is a move that allows the show to subvert the conventions of the superhero genre which is a "realignment of the previously goofy superhero genre: it became darker, pessimistic and pseudo-realistic" (Riegler 106). While *Gotham* is not the only superhero show to subvert this expected notion of the "good-guy" in the superhero genre, it does not try to redeem Gordon either because Gordon is not at the core of the story, Gotham is. Gordon is simply another character who falls victim to Gotham's harsh streets and corrupt moral centre in order to achieve his results, suggesting no one is spared from the harsh reality of this dystopian regime. Gordon's journey to becoming an anti-hero on the streets of Gotham works to undermine the superhero element of the show. Whilst many of the characters around Gordon have superpowers, Gordon himself remains human and vulnerable. Despite his actions leading him to becoming an anti-hero, it is his presence as an anti-hero that allows audiences to be reminded of the corruption Gotham can have on its citizens. Spivey and Knowlton have stated "we see our flawed selves in anti-heroes, and this allows us to understand their humanity, even when their deeds are questionable evil" (62). Gordon's position as the everyday man is vital for audiences to identity with him as the entry point into this dystopian world and this parallel between Gordon and the audience allows for a convincing exploration of society's reflected fears and anxieties.

Gotham City being the main "character" allows the show to juggle many characters and storylines throughout its episodes with the setting of the city being the only constant. The show's producer suggested, "we always knew this was the show in which Gotham the city was the star" (Cannon qtd in Patten n.pg). This show, at its core, is the story about how a city created these characters and how that city would one day manage to create Batman to defend it. It is about the corruption of the citizens that live there, both good and bad, and the consequences a city that is fuelled by power and corruption has on people. A story that could easily be translated into our own narratives and lives where politics fuels heated debates and the course of our world changes based on who is wielding that power. The characters in *Gotham* are the consequences but the city itself is the cause. *Gotham* manages to reflect societal concerns about the corruption

of power and the people who wield it back to the audience, as all successful dystopias do. It asks a lot of questions about the ways power can corrupt a person, who should wield that power and what might they do with it. For example, Theo Galavan runs for mayor of Gotham City and wins through deceit and trickery by orchestrating an event in which the citizens of Gotham will see him as their saviour and worthy of holding office ("Strike Force"), which draws similarities to the real-world political issues of government corruption that society often concerns itself with.

The Sets

The most impactful way in which *Gotham* achieves its dystopian landscape is through the use of its sets, both in style and in tone, in order to portray a convincing urban cityscape that is reminiscent of a dystopian world. The distinctive style is immediately recognisable in its attempts to make the show appear ageless. The lack of technology shown throughout works as a way to convey a style that is both outdated and modern. Gordon uses a flip phone rather than the latest iPhone, the GCPD's chunky radios seem to have the 80s aesthetic and all the television sets in *Gotham* are large boxed in sets with antenna to channel the 50s era of technology. VanDerWerff has suggested, "The city's streets pulse with electric life, and the show seems to have one foot in the 40s and one foot in the 2010s" (n.pg). The lack of technology in order to portray a timelessness to the show helps support its dystopia, making it a believable setting for the past, present or future. The lack of any dates throughout the show prevent the audience from placing it to a specific time period in keeping with the dystopia theme of the setting.

The show's many sets, including the apartment interiors and the street exteriors, give the outdated nostalgia feel to them in order to maintain *Gotham*'s timeless aesthetic. The streets are bleak and dark, every scene in this show has been washed out to dull the colour palette as a way to convey the hopelessness of Gotham and to present it as an urban landscape. The GCPD precinct is one of the main sets used throughout the show and it gives off an industrial tone. There are lots of dark metal support beams throughout with large steel bolts holding them in place and a clock face built into the centre of the building. There is a distinctive Victorian influence to the sets too, channelling the gothic style that seems to be favoured in many dystopian films such as *Blade Runner* (1982). Milner has noted that "the importance of the city as a site of

utopia and dystopia imaginings, emphasising both the historical recency and the historical reality of the social experience of the megalopolis" (263). The set of the GCPD seems to take inspiration from the Victorian age and the days of the industrial revolution, once again a nod to the blue-collar working-class men that occupy it and a way to draw parallels from history which the audience can easily identify. This unites both Gotham and our own western cities under the same historical framework, merging both the dystopia and the present day. Police officers like Gordon and his partner, Harvey Bullock (played by Donal Logue), are the men working to build a better Gotham; these men are tackling corruption and crime in the city to clean up the town, much like the workers of the industrial revolution built cities and towns. In a sense, these men are the underdogs with the criminals ruling Gotham and exerting their power over the city via corruption and fear.

The Villains

It is the city's villains that get the most colour via harsh backlighting of vibrant colours related to their characters. Ed Nygma/The Riddler (played by Cory Michael Smith), is a forensic technician turned riddle-loving killer. He has an apartment lit by neon green backlighting through the windows (his signature colour in the comics) that stands out amongst the darker shots of the rest of the scene. Oswald Cobblepot/The Penguin is often backlit with a soft purple glow (the colour associated with him throughout the show). This pop of colour sets them apart from the darker colour palette used for the GCPD and even Gordon himself. They do not fit the mould of the dystopian city of Gotham, the colour draws attention to these characters and makes them stand out which is exactly what the show does with their characters. The vibrant colour also draws attention to *Gotham*'s campier aesthetic which is often prominently featured through the villains of the show. This is another way through which the show highlights the individuality of these characters. The camp aesthetic juxtaposes with the darker, gritty tone of *Gotham*'s dystopia frequently over the seasons, suggesting a jarring battle between the two themes. This fluctuation between the dystopia (normally presented by Gordon and the GCPD) and the camp flare of individuality (as presented through the villains) helps to establish the wider narrative of the show, the battle between *Gotham*'s dystopian landscape and those individuals attempting to resist it.

The villains, particularly The Riddler and The Penguin, get the most character development (not even Gordon really changes that much from the first episode to the last, his motives to clean up the city do not waver) and the use of colour for these characters in a show that uses washed out shots for most of its scenes make them stand out. This works both as a signal to their individualism and as a signifier that they no longer fit the narrative of the underdogs being suppressed by Gotham's dystopian regime. Oswald Cobblepot is an underdog when audiences first meet him, he is an umbrella boy in another gang's organisation. A person everyone overlooks and underestimates; he is given the nickname "Penguin" as a way to ridicule him for his limp. Over the course of the first season Oswald rises to power through various means of deceit and trickery until he manages to kill Fish Mooney (Jada Pinkett Smith), his old boss and mentor, and take over her gang; therefore proclaiming himself to be "The King of Gotham" ("All Happy Families Are Alike"). Merrifield has noted that in dystopian narratives the main characters are often, "all types of psychologically damaged, torn and twisted individuals: déclassé civil servants, losers, alcoholics, gamblers and loners and petty criminals" (476). Cobblepot fits into this but so does Nygma. This move towards individualism through psychological damage and violence that *Gotham* depicts show the villains moving against Gotham's dystopian regime and becoming aware of how the city works. It is only after they realise this that they move to take power for themselves, allowing a more colourful and campier aesthetic to be developed for their characters, which is ultimately a way to symbolise this shift.

When audiences first meet Edward Nygma he is working for the GCPD; the first season goes to great lengths to show how everyone's treatment of Nygma as a weird and awkward man who loves to give them riddles instead of the answer supports the theory of Nygma being another underdog. He is in the lowest level of the GCPD hierarchy and is often overlooked and ignored. He is not shown to have any confidence or much in the way of social skills and is often teased by both his colleagues and the woman he has a crush on, Kristen Kringle (Chelsea Spack). This changes when Nygma "snaps" killing an officer that threatened to hurt Kristen, causing the appearance of a new personality – The Riddler ("Under the Knife"). It is only after Nygma has also killed Kristen by accidently strangling her after she finds out he is a murderer that Nygma and The Riddler merge to become one person therefore breaking out of their status as the underdog to become one of Gotham's most notorious villains ("By Fire").

Christopher has suggested, “dystopian narratives are more introspective. ‘We’ are our own worst enemy” (60). It is through this reflection that the villains of Gotham unfold, they are their own worst enemy and because of that they become corrupted. The villains of Gotham not only demonstrate the corruption of the city but also the flaws in Gotham’s capitalist regime. It is only after they try to progress towards development and subsequently to take more power that they are allowed to show individualism, something which Gordon and the other cops do not have because they are still part of the GCPD unit and Gotham’s hierarchy. The villains, like The Penguin and The Riddler, are products of Gotham city. Their mistreatment by its citizens and their desire for power causes them to rise from their previously established places within the hierarchy of Gotham. In the dystopian world of Gotham’s corruption, murder is the price for individualism because it goes against the capitalist order that runs the city.

Gotham’s storylines often deal with the notion of capitalism and hierarchy within the city, which is notorious in particular through the inclusion of Jerome (played by Cameron Monaghan). As a Joker-esque type of villain who tries to challenge the ideologies of the Gotham City residents, Jerome seeks to make them see they are trapped in a prison of their own making (“The Gentle Art of Making Enemies”). His character confronts the capitalist ideology that Gotham has in place. In one of his schemes, Jerome cuts off power in Gotham and orders the citizens to commit whatever violence they like whilst he kidnaps Bruce Wayne, a symbol of Gotham’s elite. Jerome’s plan is to show Bruce the chaos that is happening as working-class people take to the streets to commit violence against the people who have wronged them. He is trying to highlight the flaws in Gotham’s society by allowing people to be free from the capitalist regime that benefits the elite (like Bruce) but does nothing to serve the underdogs like himself and many of Gotham’s other villains/citizens. This further supports the notion that the villains of Gotham are the only ones who understand the flaws of Gotham’s capitalist system, a system that Gordon and the GCPD are trying to protect. By making them the focus of this story rather than a superhero, the show allows its villains to be pushed into the role of the typical dystopian “saviour” character. Despite their methods, which are a product of Gotham’s corruption, these villains are trying to show the people of Gotham the flaws in their society. A society that favours the rich and shuns the individuals, such as The Riddler or The Penguin, because they dare to move away from their place within the hierarchy and rise up to power.

These ideas link back to conventions of the dystopia as Merrifield noted, “it was there that poverty, class injustice, dark satanic mills and rampant individualism prevailed” (263). Many of Gotham’s villains demonstrate this rampant individualism as the show goes to great lengths to depict the class injustice of the city. Jerome is not the only villain to tackle such matters. Another criminal bent on making people see the flaws in their society is Professor Pyg (played by Michael Cerveris), a man who dresses up in a pig mask and kills in order to highlight issues of class in the narrative. During an episode he kills homeless people and bakes them into pies, forcing the rich to eat them at a party to emphasis the mistreatment the poor have suffered at the hands of the rich (“Let Them Eat Pie”). Storylines like this one are used to emphasise the class injustice to both the characters in the show and the audience who is watching. They are meant to be uncomfortable episodes because they challenge society’s structure of class division and force audiences to think about their own society and its treatment of people with different economic status. The use of its storylines is another reason Gotham is a dystopian landscape, able to navigate difficult topics such as these in order to reflect those issues back to our own society. Gotham does it in an extreme way, it is dramatic and flamboyant, but ultimately it’s jarring and memorable. This show is not trying to be subtle in its approach of these topics, it’s trying to get people to take notice of them. The surrounding discussion the show makes of these issues is why it is such an effective dystopian world, one that audiences believe is so dire and sick that one day it will need someone like Batman to help it. The show manages to create enough flamboyant characters and quirky fantasy elements to allow the storylines to tackle such themes relating to societal concerns whilst keeping the audience at a safe distance from the depths of realistic issues, such as capitalism, that it is exploring.

A New Dystopia

A significant change in Gotham’s dystopian landscape occurs in season four’s finale (“No Man’s Land”) which sees Jeremiah (played by Cameron Monaghan), Jerome’s brother and another Joker-type figure, blow up the bridges that connect Gotham to the rest of the world, effectively making them an island with no way out. Gotham’s current dystopia morphs into a new dystopia over the course of season five. This change is interesting because it provides a greater parallel between the show and how it mirrors the anxieties of its audience that things can always get worse. Albaina

has stated, “the fact is that one cannot fail to see dystopia as an exacerbated projection of contemporary fears” (124). *Gotham*’s fifth season deals with this, suddenly the dystopia is presented as a close reflection of our own society that has suffered a huge catastrophe causing that dystopia to give way to a new even worse sort of existence for the people of Gotham. This narrative draws on societal trauma of events such as 9/11 and the “War on Terror” by playing on the fears of the streets being unsafe and enemies being around every corner. Perhaps even today following the COVID-19 lockdown fears of a situation in which things can get much worse are completely justified. The “No Man’s Land” story arc details the survival of Gotham’s characters after the bridges have been blown and they have been cut off from the rest of society. The streets have been carved up into different territories for different criminals to run rampant, the GCPD has been turned into a safe haven to house any refugees still left in the city and they have no outside help or contact from anyone on the mainland. The narrative takes on a post-apocalyptic turn and this new dystopia allows the show to draw on more fears and anxieties from its audience and reflect those back to its viewers. Milner has suggested, “the architecture of the dystopian cityscape functions as a synecdoche for the wider catastrophe that has overcome their respective populations” (267). Gotham City becomes a metaphor for the rest of the world as the storyline progresses to explore how people survive in the new dystopian landscape they find themselves; a landscape that no longer works in anyone’s favour. They are all the same in this new dystopia once again showing the flaws in the previous capitalist regime and instead suggesting salvation lies in equality and everyone’s ability to work together towards the same goal.

This is further evidenced in the storyline when Haven (the GCPD’s name for the buildings in which they house the city’s refugees) gets blown up (“Penguin, Our Hero”). The imagery is powerful and reminiscent of the 9/11 ground zero images that came to light after the event. The sky is orange and filled with smoke as the buildings blaze, stragglers and survivors on the ground try to flee whilst Gordon attempts to assemble a rescue operation to search the ruins for survivors. Everything about this scene from the police leading a rescue, the burning buildings and smoke-filled shots of people running is meant to stir emotion and fear in the audience. There is even a close up of a teddy bear still on fire in order to convey the sheer horror and emotion of the characters and the event tapping into shared post-9/11 cultural anxieties and fears. Pollard has noted, “September 11 evoked powerful feelings of horror and revulsion

worldwide" (155). It is this kind of parallel *Gotham* is drawing on in these scenes, the iconography of 9/11 clear in the shots that follow in the aftermath of Haven being destroyed ("Ruin"). This imagery links Gotham's dystopia with a sense of realism in order to reflect on cultural trauma experienced during 9/11. Setting up Gotham as a dystopia is key to achieving this symbolism which is why the show establishes itself as a gritty, darker version of the superhero genre that subverts expected conventions by exploring a world where the superhero does not exist. A world much like our own, where there is no figure of impossible strength and power to stop these catastrophes from occurring.

When Gordon finally contacts the outside world via a radio signal and the government officials are sent in to help Gotham, it is not as easy a solution as Gordon – and the audience – might have hoped. The government does not mean salvation for Gotham. Biskind has suggested, "the authorities are again the enemy, as toxic as its freakish supervillains: the Joker, the Penguin, the Riddler et al" (105). The government is shown to be corrupt, having been taken over by a new villain that wants to destroy Gotham, which gives the people of Gotham a mutual enemy. The plot develops to the ultimate stage of ordering Gotham to be destroyed by the army as it is deemed unsavable ("They Did What?"). The government acts as the top of the hierarchy this season, having the final say on Gotham's fate despite Gordon's best efforts to save his city. This once again highlights the flaws of a capitalist regime that might work for the people at the top but does nothing to benefit those lower down. Pollard has stated that dystopias often "depicted the US Government as corrupt, brutal, and ineffective especially the military and intelligence units. Their operatives often function as villains and their missions often turn out to be secretive, illegal and unconstitutional" (158). *Gotham* takes this literally in the creation of Bane (Gordon's army friend turned into the infamous Gotham villain played by Shane West); he becomes the villain in order to emphasis the corruption of the government in Gotham. The army will not be there to help them. This reflects upon the societal idea of power and hierarchy by challenging the ideology regarding who controls power and what might happen if they were to abuse it. Whilst *Gotham* discusses this issue in an extreme way, its criticism of this capitalist ideal is justified and causes audiences to think about their own ideas and beliefs regarding these issues.

This display of villainy and corruption does prompt a call to action within the narrative; with everyone, police and villains alike, united against a common enemy, there seems to be some hope as they stand against a corrupt government to save Gotham. This scene is visually and narratively important as it book-ends the opening and closing of this story arc within season five's storyline of Gotham. In the opening episode, audiences see a glimpse of this moment with the title card "DAY 391" ("Year Zero"), what follows is a montage that is reminiscent of a call to arms. The scene opens up with sirens and smoke over the dark cityscape of Gotham before moving to each character as they all come together to go to war. Audiences see the Riddler putting on his signature bowler hat and picking up a gun before moving to Penguin to see him also suiting up for the occasion. There is then a cut of Harvey Bullock drinking in an abandoned bar before audiences see Gordon strapping his badge and gun to his hip, the letters "GCPD" bold and striking on his bulletproof vest. The scene shifts to the moment these unlikely "heroes" assemble, a slow motion of them walking together as a group, they are strong and united as they mount the barricade – another nod to the themes of revolution and the underdogs pushing back against the hierarchy that confines them – as the scene reaches a crescendo. This shot visibly places these characters in the higher ground on top of the barricade looking down at government agents before Gordon gives the rallying cry that unites them all: "For Gotham!". This scene is a glimpse of what is to come, a scene that audiences finally understand in the climax of this storyline as it plays out fully within the narrative of the story. Fingeroth has noted, "each generation will redefine the superhero according to its needs" (172).

Gotham seems to support a move away from traditional superhero narratives that feature a lone figure of impossible power and strength, a moral compass for good that seems too perfect to be realistic. Instead, it favours something much closer to our real life. Gotham hints at a generation that does not necessarily seek a superhero figure in the traditional sense, like Superman or The Flash, but rather a figure that can be morally ambiguous and support the idea of a large-scale team up. *Gotham* is not the only superhero text to support an unlikely team up in recent years, audiences can find such teams in *DC's Legends of Tomorrow* (2016-) or even *Avengers Assemble* (2012). Through its narrative that spans over five seasons, *Gotham* manages to unite both cops and villains and even the young Bruce Wayne, if only for a moment, on the same side in order to defeat the government (depicted as the ultimate evil) and save Gotham. This

moment almost seems like a utopia within the dystopia, everyone working together as equals in order to save their city. Of course, like every utopia this moment does not last and as soon as Gotham is back to "normal" they all go back of their own agendas. Yet, this moment of triumph manages to restore the balance back within Gotham. This conveys the "we're all in this together" message that parallels our own governments trying to unite people together in times of turmoil, reinforcing the idea that peace can be found through equality. This point is another similarity with society that offers a sense of realism and allows audiences to draw on their own worries within the show.

Gotham takes this further though, not only offering a glimpse of hope for its characters but by effectively having this bring about the death of capitalism within the narrative. Bruce Wayne leaves Gotham, the last of the elite families that were said to run Gotham and his manor (a symbol of wealth and power) is destroyed to further emphasis this point. Gotham goes back to some kind of order, the GCPD rebuilds and law is back in place as an institution that protects and serves all members of society with Gordon becoming commissioner as a beacon of newly found hope and existence. He is a man that has been both a criminal ("Prisoners") and a cop, a man who has helped bring order to the lawless city and has helped the likes of The Penguin with their own agendas. Gordon represents both sides of the hierarchy, a friend of Bruce Wayne and a working-class man himself and as such is portrayed as the best hope for Gotham and its citizens to create a lawful and just city. This promotion ends the show on a hopeful outlook rather than a bleak one, a new kind of order that does not serve a capitalist regime and a message for audiences that if there is still hope for Gotham, then there is hope for their own society as well.

In conclusion, *Gotham* portrays the city as a dystopia through its subversion of the expected superhero genre conventions to add a sense of realism to the story for the dystopia to be relatable and believable. The series uses the settings, the characters and the storylines to explore the dystopian world of the city and establishes parallels between that and societies' own ideologies, playing on their fears and anxieties to reflect on ideas about capitalism. The show develops its idea of a dystopia further by presenting audiences with a new dystopia through the fifth season of *Gotham* so as to convey fears and concerns about how things can escalate. This allows the show to tap into iconography from 9/11 to convey an added sense of realism to the world of their dystopia. However, the show ends its run on a positive note for the audience, destroying

the capitalist regime it had set up in the first few seasons and portraying scenes of equality and hope in the final showdown between the people of Gotham and the government in order to re-establish the balance of the city and suggest the importance of hope in unlikely heroes and sticking together during times of turmoil.

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Some Years From This Exact Moment: Ambivalent Dystopian Science Fiction Satire

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Abstract | This article investigates the relationship between satire and science fiction in three films: *The Running Man*, *Southland Tales*, and *Gamer*. Building on the work of sci-fi scholars such as Darko Suvin and Vivian Sobchack, as well as film scholars such as Steven Shaviro, Dan Harries, and Johan Nilsson, it proposes that these films, and others like them, are best understood as "ambivalent dystopian science fiction satires," a term that effectively captures their combination of clear satiric critique and a celebratory, questionably satirical use of exaggeration and excess. By examining how each of these films utilize intertextuality and excessive stylistic techniques to create their satire, it hopes to better understand how these films can function as *both* striking satire and "trashy" entertainment, and why this ambivalence may help to account for their frequent critical and scholarly dismissal.

Keywords | dystopia; satire; *Gamer* (2009); *Southland Tales* (2007); *The Running Man* (1987)

Resumo | Este artigo investiga a relação entre sátira e ficção científica em três filmes: *The Running Man*, *Southland Tales*, e *Gamer*. Tendo por base o trabalho de autores como Darko Suvin e Vivan Sobchack nos estudos de ficção científica e Steven Shaviro, Dan Harries e Johan Nilsson nos estudos de cinema, propõe-se que estes filmes, e outros semelhantes, podem ser melhor entendidos como "sátiras distópicas ambivalentes de ficção científica", definição que abarca a sua combinação de uma clara crítica satírica com o uso do exagero e excesso de uma forma celebratória e de sátira duvidosa. Ao examinar como cada um destes filmes utiliza a intertextualidade e técnicas estilísticas excessivas para criar sátira, espera-se compreender melhor a forma como estes filmes funcionam *simultaneamente* enquanto sátira acutilante e entretenimento "barato" e como esta ambivalência pode dar conta da frequente rejeição crítica e académica destes filmes.

Palavras Chave | distopia; sátira; *Gamer* (2009); *Southland Tales* (2007); *The Running Man* (1987)

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Satire and science fiction have enjoyed a long, albeit rocky, relationship. While a canonical science fiction (hereafter SF) essay such as Darko Suvin's "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre" explicitly connects the critical methodology of SF with satire, many of the authors that Suvin cites (Jonathan Swift, Jack London, Yevgeny Zamyatin, etc.) are typically seen as more "literary" authors than as authors of lower class, "genre" SF (377). Nevertheless, there is undoubtedly a strong tradition of SF works that prominently use satire, particularly in film, a form that thrives on such genre works. However, since literature and film are very different media in many respects, their approaches to SF and satire vary greatly as well. Brooks Landon identifies several major differences, including SF film's tendency to borrow from other genres more than SF literature does and a greater sense of ambivalence within SF film than in SF literature (14). He also argues that SF is determined more by reactions and responses of audiences than by any specific formal characteristics inherent in a text itself (Landon 5). If satire in SF film is particularly ambivalent, though, how can we effectively reconcile these two positions? How are audiences cued (or fail to be cued) so as to recognize satire in such films?

To address this, I will examine three films that clearly do *not* fit in with the prestigious critical works that Suvin references as representative of satirical SF: *The*

Running Man (Paul Michael Glaser, 1987), *Southland Tales* (Richard Kelly, 2007), and *Gamer* (Neveldine/Taylor, 2009).[1] All three are filled with graphic violence and vulgarity, embrace excessive action movie stereotypes and, in both production design and style, utilize over-the-top, often garish, visual presentations. These are films that have been frequently embraced as merely a guilty pleasure or have been derided as puerile, insipid, and much worse by various critics. However, they also share other similarities that seem to align them into a coherent category, one that I would label the "ambivalent dystopian science fiction satire," a term that helps account for both their status as satire *and* the mixed or hostile reception to them as SF satires. While I do not intend for this to be a strictly defined subcategory or subgenre of SF as a whole, I hope to provide some insight on the confluence of SF and satire and *how* SF film as a whole can work to create this sense of ambivalence. In what ways do these films both clearly fit as dystopian SF satire *and* fail to do so for audiences? How can we reconcile these two approaches, and what might they tell us about SF, taste, and satire within film? In answering queries such as these, I hope to further expand our understanding of ambivalence, dystopia, and satire within the realm of SF film.

Clarifying Ambivalence: Dystopia, Satire, and Film

Beyond Suvin, how have others characterized SF and satire? Vivian Sobchack connects satire with humor and parody, drawing attention to the comedic elements of satire that I also consider an integral component of the term (162-178). She likewise sees SF as particularly well suited to integrating with satire given that SF's "creation of a time and/or place not present" provides us with "the distance necessary for satire to function" (Sobchack 170). This provides a reinforcement of Suvin's concept of cognitive estrangement, pointing to how, by showing "ourselves *now* under the thin guise of *then* or *when*," SF works with satire to defamiliarize our present so as to critique it (Sobchack 170). Ambivalence is also a defining feature of SF film for Brooks Landon, and he identifies it as referring to "the unique product of the intersection of literary SF themes and thinking with genre movie motifs and archetypes" that are

[1] While *Southland Tales*, the eagerly anticipated follow up to Kelly's cult hit *Donnie Darko*, did debut at the prestigious Cannes film festival in 2006, it met with an overwhelmingly negative response, and it is on the basis of this critical reaction (reinforced in the film's eventual theatrical release) that I consider it a "low prestige" film.

produced in SF film (19). Landon sees SF films as containing not only ambivalent but even contradictory worldviews within them, often directing ambivalence to aspects of society such as science, the military, and public authority (20). This also fits with David Sandner's argument that early works of literary SF satire, such as Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* and H.G. Wells' *The First Men in the Moon*, took the discourse around Europe's 19th century imperial project and the genre of the imperial romance and used SF to turn these into a satire of the imperial project itself (5-6). He also sees Georges Méliès' 1902 film *La Voyage Dans La Lune* as "borrow[ing] freely" from both the Verne and Wells novels, incorporating elements and ideas from each as it sees fit, and thus functioning in part to satirize those works and to satirize the notion of scientific advancement as a whole (Sandner 14). This provides an early example of SF satire using intertextuality to layer its critique, a process that deeply informs all of the films I will be examining, especially in their critiques of media culture at the time of their making. There is a clear line, then, between the ambivalence in SF film and the ambivalence present in the satirical SF of Verne, Welles, and Méliès. SF itself would also seem to be a particularly fruitful genre for incorporating satire because of this propensity toward ambivalent critique.

While this addresses the ambivalent aspect of the term, how does the "dystopian" aspect of ambivalent dystopian SF satire apply? Sobchack sees utopias and dystopias as providing "a natural affinity" with satire that helps explain why dystopia is a particularly useful descriptive term in the formulation of ambivalent dystopian SF satire (170). However, this is not intended to invoke the entire tradition of utopian and dystopian literature and/or film so much as it is designed to specify a particular subgenre of SF. Thus, in formulating this term, the dystopian element helps separate SF film satires more broadly (for example, parodies with satirical elements such as *Spaceballs* or satires not set within a clearly dystopian society such as *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*) from those SF satires that are explicitly placed in a dystopic setting. Furthermore, while I do not necessarily preclude the possibility of a dystopian SF satire set in the present or in an alternative history, the examples I am discussing here, as well as other films that would fit within this category, all take place in specifically dystopian futures.[2] If futurity is indeed a requirement for this category, it

[2] See, for example, films such as *RoboCop*, *Demolition Man*, *Escape from L.A.*, or *Starship Troopers*.

may be because it is necessary to create that sense of distance and estrangement from the present to clearly critique it, creating works that represent "*what it feels like* to live in the early twenty-first century"[3] (Shaviro 1).

This brings us to possibly the slipperiest part of ambivalent dystopian SF satire: satire itself. Putting aside for the moment the vast body of work on literary satire over the centuries, I want to briefly focus on some of the issues related to defining satire within film specifically. If classical satire can be (over)simply defined as "exaggeration to prove a point," this approach struggles to suffice within the context of film (Stam et. al. 86). Many scholars on the subject define satire in relation to parody, with the former seen as "proving a point" through its use of content (generally social or political) while the latter makes fun of its targets via its use of form (that is, familiar aesthetic techniques) (King 93-107, Gray 47). This can create a further ambivalence, though, when media forms themselves are targeted by satire, as happens in each of the films I will be discussing: does using particular media forms thus make such examples parodies and "lesser" in some way than satire, or does it instead complicate common understandings of the form/content divide between satire and parody? More useful, and underlying my approach, are the perspectives on satire proffered by Dan Harries and Johan Nilsson. Harries critiques the form/content divide between parody and satire as reinforcing the "illusion" that form is separable from social discourse more broadly, instead opening up space for form/content and parody/satire to overlap and interact in more complex ways (32). Nilsson, drawing from the work of neoformalists such as David Bordwell, likewise embraces form as one of the ways in which films create satirical cues for their viewers, again blurring the line between form and content, and allowing for the possibility of satire, using both in its critiques (1-24). In the rest of this essay, then, I wish to consider the satire within ambivalent dystopian SF satire films as a humorous critique of the social/political and of media concepts/forms.

This is particularly important given that all of the films I will be considering do not simply critique the targets of their satire but simultaneously celebrate them as well. Likely one of the main reasons why many of these films are critically maligned is that they offer viewers conflicting cues, with a confluence of savage critique and joyous celebration. However, this is exactly why these films work as they do: by overlaying

[3] Emphasis in original

the negativity and harsh critique of dystopian SF with the positivity of comedy and the invigoration of formal experimentation, creating an explosively dialectical form that is the embodiment of Landon's ambivalence *par excellence*. It is, finally, the reason why I label these particular films as ambivalent dystopian SF satire so as to separate them from works that invoke dystopian SF and satire to form an aggressive, but largely *un*-ambivalent critique, including films such as *Brazil* and any number of dystopian SF literary works, from *1984* and *Brave New World* to *The Handmaid's Tale* and beyond. Following Harries and Nilsson, then, I not only want to look at the form and content of these films, but also to provide a better sense of how these films cue satire to specifically create this ambivalent, dystopic effect.

The Running Man

Based on a Stephen King novel (written under the pseudonym Richard Bachman), 1987's *The Running Man* centers around protagonist Ben Richards (Arnold Schwarzenegger), a policeman framed for massacring protesters, as he competes on the TV show "The Running Man", where he is hunted as he tries to survive, clear his name, and ultimately take down the state-run ICS TV's totalitarian media empire. Critically, *The Running Man* received mixed or hostile notices, with its potential for satire singled out by *Variety* as being "paperthin [sic] and constantly contradicted" by the violence that it is supposedly critiquing ("The Running Man"). One particular reason for this ambivalence seems due to the film's use of exaggeration as a primary satirical technique, especially in its critique of celebrity culture. The arrival of Killian, host of "The Running Man" and arguably the most well-known face in the film's dystopic America, is presented via numerous low angle shots and a frequently roving camera that accentuate his adoring public, while his emergence from the limo itself frames a looming Killian standing against a bright, blue-white sky in an extremely low angle shot as if he were the hero of a classical Soviet film. The arrival of Buzzsaw, one of the show's star "stalkers", likewise uses a handheld camera to embed and align the spectator with the throng of celebrity hounds, while a shaky, shot/reverse shot encounter between Buzzsaw and one devoted fan ends with Buzzsaw violently shoving the man away before cutting to a shot of the fan on the ground, bleeding from his nose, and excitedly calling: "He touched me! Buzzsaw touched me!". Through this blending of stylistic techniques and content, the film satirizes the cult of personality and fervent

consumption of these media figures, as the fan's encounter with Buzzsaw merges media celebrity with something more akin to religious fervor to accentuate this satire.

While such exaggeration is rife throughout the film, especially in the highly theatrical, over-the-top introductions of each stalker to the studio audience, much of the film's satire combines such exaggeration with an emphasis on intertextuality, adding ambivalence by critiquing a violent, star-driven media industry while also clearly functioning as a part of it. This is furthered by the film's casting, particularly in the case of Richard Dawson, famous as the host of TV game show stalwart *Family Feud* from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, appearing as "The Running Man" show host Killian. Dawson's appearance adds a layer of critique and connection between the dystopian future depicted in the film and the film's contemporaneous media landscape; the show's novum is not its extreme popularity or omnipresence but the fact that it adds lethal combat to the already extant cultural force of popular game shows. The presence of Schwarzenegger likewise adds to the film's ambivalent satire. His tendency to spout pithy one-liners, especially after dispatching stalkers and other foes, fits the archetypes of 1980s action cinema, but the film also calls attention to the constructed nature of this image, as when Schwarzenegger self-consciously delivers his most famous line from 1984's *The Terminator* when he tells Killian "I'll be back". Elsewhere, after escaping from prison earlier in the film, Richards is seen wearing a World Gym t-shirt (pointing to Schwarzenegger's own bodybuilding past) with a large cigar clamped comically between his teeth. Such satirical cues leave us uncertain as to how to understand them: is this simply just another Schwarzenegger action vehicle, a tongue-in-cheek repudiation of such baroque, hyper masculine films, or some combination of the two?

The ending only complicates this further, as it climaxes with a host of action movie clichés: the villain is killed, the evil ICS goes off the air, and Richards "gets the girl" (Amber) as a synth-heavy 1980s power ballad rises on the soundtrack. But, rather than simply providing a clear, unambiguous return to normalcy for the spectator, this ending remains resolutely ambivalent. The song itself, obviously non-diegetic, is a love song with lyrics (such as "running away with you" and "you hit the right spot," a line associated with Killian in the film) that, while tangentially linked to the film, essentially conflate the film with the extra cinematic realm of a musical tie-in: the film's events become little more than fodder for a marketable pop single. As the credits continue to roll, the song is replaced by "The Running Man" show announcer thanking the various

program sponsors, further collapsing the distinction between the film itself and the media production it satirizes. As the film ends, then, it offers the spectator no clear break between the dystopian SF world of the film and the corporate-sponsored, media-saturated landscape of its 1980s release.

Southland Tales

Although the world of media evolved greatly in the two decades between *The Running Man* and *Southland Tales*, it remains at the center of the latter film's dystopian SF satire. By then, the internet had become the prime target for critique, but the film also broadens its range of satire through a pointed critique of the post-9/11 George W. Bush administration.[4] However, it was also met with a disastrous reception, both at its 2006 Cannes premiere and its virtually nonexistent 2007 theatrical release. This is likely due at least in part to its sprawling cast of characters and complex plot, which features a totalitarian America overseen by a Patriot Act-established organization called USIdent, a bumbling resistance movement (the Neo-Marxists) trying to bring it down, media celebrities, a presidential election, and a healthy dose of bizarre, half SF and half supernatural events. However, the critical reception often honed in on *Southland Tales* specifically as a failed satire, such as when Roger Ebert labeled the film as incoherent rather than satirical (Ebert 8). Even a champion of the film like scholar Steven Shaviro describes *Southland Tales* as SF over satire (65). Thus, it is worth examining some of the ways in which the film creates satire to better understand why it engendered such mixed responses.

Like *The Running Man*, *Southland Tales* makes use of a great deal of layered intertextuality, taking the tendency to combine characters and the popular personas of the actors that play them even further. Per Shaviro, each of the main actors in *Southland Tales* "works against their familiar personas" to create "a kind of cognitive dissonance" between the audiences' perception of an actor's star persona and the type of character they play in the film (88). But this goes even further as certain characters will vacillate between exaggerating their typical persona (much like Schwarzenegger does in *The Running Man*) and satirizing that persona by acting against type. This is particularly

[4] Richard Kelly admits that 9/11 shifted the film's target from a satire of Hollywood to a satire of post-9/11 American politics (O'Donnell 8-9).

true of Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, former professional wrestler turned action movie star, whose performance as Boxer Santaros both plays up his persona (as in his knowing wink to Dr. Kuntzler) and combines it with atypically comic acting (such as the frequent nervous tapping together of his fingers).[5] Of course, nearly all of *Southland Tales*' characters are exaggerations, if not outright caricatures. Beyond dialogue, the costuming and makeup of certain characters (especially Baron von Westphalen and Nana Mae Frost) add significantly to this, as does the *mise-en-scène* of various locations (such as the headquarters of the Neo-Marxists). While this causes Shaviro to argue that the film's compositional logic has “little to do with conventional film syntax”, there are many times when the film does make use of such conventions for satirical ends (70). *Southland Tales* incorporates such “grandiose stylistic flourishes” as the lengthy Steadicam shot when Boxer first boards the Baron's mega zeppelin, but much of the film is more mundane in its emphasis on simple single shots, two-shots, and shot/reverse shot editing patterns (McCarthy). This mundanity serves an additional function, as it often works to invoke the conventional visual syntax of mainstream comedy and merge it with dystopian SF film to create a new, hybrid approach emphasizing the comedic elements of its satire. The emphasis on reaction shots, the division of characters into “straight” and “crazy” comic duos (as when Krysta Now and her director, Cyndi, discuss Krysta's business plan), and even the foregrounding of Neo-Marxists Dream and Dion as improvisation comediants (played by the duo of improvisation comediant Amy Poehler and dramatic actor Wood Harris, respectively) all work to seemingly blend disparate genres and reinforce the film's satire of “comically inept” political discourse.[6]

Southland Tales also uses the constant presence of consumption (literally and figuratively) and the body (especially through depictions of, and references to, defecation and vomiting) to create a sustained satirical critique of consumer culture. The graphic interface used early on to provide the film's backstory juxtaposes news clips, maps, and other moving images (akin to a packed browser window) with the display's three corporate sponsors (Bud Light, Hustler, and Panasonic) on the left side

[5] It is worth noting that, while firmly established as a comic actor now, *Southland Tales* was one of Johnson's first explicitly comic roles.
[6] Shaviro uses this phrase to describe the Neo-Marxists in the film, but it effectively applies to other groups as well (64).

of the frame.[7] Shortly thereafter, a shot pans past a tank with a large Hustler logo on its side, even more explicitly merging the consumption of sex with an ever-expanding military-industrial complex. Other examples involve more literal consumption, as when Krysta drinks from a can of her own branded energy drink, her face on the can pointed toward the camera so as to mirror the actual Krysta's face as she drinks. Much like *The Running Man*, this conflates and combines the cult of consumption with the cult of personality, but in an even more densely layered way. Take, for instance, the character of Starla as she attempts to contact and meet her idol, Boxer. She constantly eats cheese puffs, drawing a comparison between her star consumption and her physical consumption, which reaches its zenith as Starla follows/stalks Boxer before finally meeting him: a rack focus moves from Boxer in the foreground, absurdly attempting to drink an entire six-pack of Bud Light at once, to Starla, eating (as always) in the background. Through what is perhaps a too conventional element of film style, *Southland Tales* merges the mindless consumption of media personas with the mindless consumption of food into a scathingly humorous, if potentially thinly cued, satirical critique.

The film takes this further by also concentrating on what happens after consumption, especially in the film's insistence on toilets and bathrooms in its settings. A key prop in the Neo-Marxists' headquarters is a massive toilet bowl near their computers, while Starla's main job at USIdent involves her observing the LAX bathrooms on a four-way split screen, as if foregrounding excretion to balance her constant consumption. Unsurprisingly, the drop site at which Krysta delivers incriminating video to aid the Neo-Marxists is located inside a toilet stall. And shortly thereafter, Nana Mae, eating while watching her USIdent monitors, witnesses a man in the midst of a beachfront drinking party vomiting profusely. Not only does this present us with the inverse of consumption, using *mise-en-scène* to enhance the film's satire of consumer culture, but it foregrounds an emphasis on bodies and the bodily. This works within the broader context of the film's emphasis on diminished intelligence to simultaneously celebrate the physical while mourning the decline of the mental, creating a particularly visceral indication of the ambivalence permeating *Southland Tales*' use of satire and SF.

[7] Shaviro calls this “a brilliant list” that incorporates “three crucial commodities that are bought and sold in the age of affective labor: electronics, intoxicants, and sex” (72).

Gamer

Likewise, the 2009 film *Gamer* loves to emphasize the bodily and relationships between the mental and the physical. Perhaps it is unsurprising, then, that many of the critical responses to the film emphasized reviewers' negative physical reactions to the film, calling it (among other things) “a futuristic vomitorium of bosoms and bullets” (Catsoulis), that fails to “conjure anything that remotely resembles satire” (Nelson). One reason for this reaction may be the way in which the film incessantly works to “hyperbolize the contemporary media landscape,” saturating its satire so much as to make it apparently invisible (or at least a failure) for some viewers (Shaviro 93). Some critics did note this approach, though, as in Fred Mason's warning that “films with this sort of excess, sarcasm and parody run the risk that they do not come across as intended” because “the lines between critiquing society and spectacularizing that under criticism are very thin” (Mason 11). *Gamer* follows death row con Kable as he attempts to break free from the violent, massively popular game “Slayers” (where he is remotely controlled as if he were a video game character by his “player,” the rich teenager Simon), free his wife Angie from a form of sexual slavery in the other massively popular game, “Society,” and take down the evil Ken Castle, the tech genius who made the ability to control others' actions possible. By taking the form of an exploitation-styled action movie, *Gamer* both fits within and constitutes a satire of action cinema, helping to make it another example of ambivalent dystopian SF satire.

Exaggeration is a constant presence in *Gamer*, especially at the level of the film's style, which pushes tendencies in mainstream action cinema to absurd extremes. If David Bordwell's concept of “intensified continuity,” with a tendency toward shorter shot lengths, more extreme lens lengths, closer shot scales, and a constantly roving camera, has helped to define mainstream cinema, especially action cinema, in recent decades, *Gamer* intensifies these elements to the breaking point (Bordwell). Its average shot length is often extremely short: a not atypical scene such as Kable's trip to the Humanz headquarters takes up just forty-one seconds of screen time but is split up over thirty-eight shots, including one that is only a single frame long. Extreme lens lengths abound and create extraordinary juxtapositions, such as the one between an extreme close-up of Kable's eyes as he sits outside of prison after the first Slayers match and an extreme long shot of him and Freek dwarfed by a massive, chalky white cliff. The film's

combat sequences likewise frequently feature tight shot scales in close proximity to Kable that accentuate the chaotic action unfolding around him, and they are shot with rapidly moving handheld cameras that inject constant adrenalized movement into the film. Such intensely intensified continuity leads Shaviro to cite the film as a prime example of a work that pushes past the conventions of continuity, intensified or otherwise, into the aegis of a new stylistic regime: post-continuity (122). Other elements within the film's *mise-en-scène* further this insistence on exaggeration and excess. As in the production design of both *The Running Man* and *Southland Tales*, *Gamer* embraces bad taste in depicting its dystopia, especially in the garish colors and costuming seen in the game world of Society, but elsewhere as well. Video and computer screens are not merely omnipresent, but they often overwhelm characters, as in Castle's two-story tall screen or in Simon's gaming room, consisting of one all-encompassing screen filled with a dizzying display of data. Even the film's lighting is pushed to the point of excess (and beyond), from the flashing lights creating a rapidly morphing chiaroscuro in the transport vehicles taking prisoners to matches to the dramatic lighting at Castle's home that "puts more or less everyone who's ever cited Jacques Tourneur as an influence to shame" (Vishnevetsky). Excess, then, is not a specific formal technique of the film as much as it is a structuring principle, influencing it at every turn.

Then, what is the function of all this excess? On the one hand, it works to satirize action cinema by calling attention to the excesses already inherent in the form, and like *Running Man* and *Southland Tales*, it incorporates the media throughout to critique its omnipresence and the exploitative practices of consumer-driven entertainment. However, for each moment of clear critique, as when the film focuses briefly on repetitive actions by NPCs during Slayers matches (two characters endlessly exchanging play money; a woman in the stands repeatedly exposing a pair of plastic-molded breasts), there is another example where the film indulges in the very spectacle of sex, violence, and consumption that seems to contradict its satire. Nevertheless, the methodical way in which the film develops the relationship between mind and body implies more of a playful critique than a mindless celebration. Shots of the players controlling "avatars" in Society are framed against abstract, black backgrounds, emphasizing their mental control at the expense of their physical presence, while the portions of the film in the Society game itself center around the grotesque physicality

that players force the Society workers to endure. Literal consumption is foregrounded in the scenes with the player Gorge, a morbidly obese man who is constantly seen in sweaty close-ups, often stuffing entire waffles oozing syrup into his mouth; he plays Society to mentally engage in the physical pleasures of which his actual body is ill-equipped to partake. Thus, when a player is disconnected from their avatar it becomes a form of death, as when Simon declares "I'm dead" when he loses Kable's signal. The distance between the mental and the physical experience is no substitute for the experience itself.

Thus, the film presents us with excesses that foreground the experience of the film for the spectator. Perhaps the ultimate example of this is during Kable's escape from the game zone. He drinks a bottle of vodka, stumbles into the Slayers match, finds an abandoned vehicle, and proceeds to vomit and urinate alcohol into the gas tank to provide it with fuel. Numerous shots depict this action, including shots from inside the gas tank itself, looking up through a small aperture at Kable as he vomits, and later urinates, into the tank. Here, the bodily and the intensely physical are the very means of escape. But where does this leave the spectator, sitting watching the film more like a player than a participant, thrust into the middle of the film's physical spectacle via intensely immersive stylistic devices while still experiencing everything at a remove? Like a loop, we return to the ambivalence of ambivalent dystopian SF satire, a closed circuit of the celebration of the experience and the damning of its implications. The spectator is ultimately not the winner or the loser; they simply are a part of the cycle.

Conclusion

In many ways, this sums up ambivalent dystopian SF satire as a whole. Each of these films expresses a concern with the power of media and consumption perpetuating a *mise-en-abyme* of violence and spectatorial absorption, painting a picture of a dystopian future that is less "some years" in the future than it is the "exact moment" of now.[8] However, each film also embraces its status within this media landscape as a product for consumption, and they are unable to provide answers as to how to break this cycle and move forward. Perhaps this is why these films, and many others that fit this form of dystopian SF satire, meet with critical ambivalence if not outright disdain.

[8] To paraphrase *Gamer*'s opening epigraph, which also serves as the title of this piece.

Viewers may acknowledge that these concerns are present, but they want answers, a way past this dystopic cycle, while the films themselves remain more "procedural" and "demonstrative" than "self-reflexive" (Shaviro 126). They work to bare the device not of themselves as texts, but of the media landscape itself in which they are firmly entrenched.

Why these films in particular, and the concept of ambivalent dystopian SF satire in general, is valuable, then, is because they so tightly intertwine the distance necessary for cognitive estrangement, the shock of seeing things as they are from the perspective of a future elsewhere, with the awareness of the norms inherent in the popular media forms that these works use now. They are rich texts because they force the spectator to try to disentangle these strands (and the larger web of globalized capital of which they are a part) without being able to fully do so, not in spite of this fact. And because they are dense texts, there are far more issues in these three works (not to mention the others cited) than I have had the opportunity to discuss here. Certainly, issues of race and gender are key, and often problematic, concerns for all three films. Is Terry Crews' Hackman in *Gamer* simply a racist stereotype, a satirical critique of the African-American stereotypes in action films, or both?[9] A similar question could be asked of Amber *vis-à-vis* gender stereotypes in *The Running Man*, the treatment of Angie's character in *Gamer*, or the films of Neveldine/Taylor in general, which have been specifically referred to as "hyper masculine" because of their extremely hyper mediated nature, an observation that could likewise apply to each of the three films discussed here and their musclebound male action stars (Palmer, *Cranked*). My sense is that, much like the prime targets of satire in these texts, the answers to these questions are ambivalent, potentially celebrating demeaning aspects in their presentations of race and gender as much as they are critiquing them. What is ultimately important for us to do, then, is to better wrestle with these questions and the ambivalence within such dystopian SF satires. What ideas are worth dealing with in these films? What do they tell us about the time of their making and the world we live in now? Ultimately, they can help us better understand what ambivalent dystopian SF satire is, how it functions, and why we are so fascinated with joyfully critiquing the very things we are ashamed to desire.

[9] The character of Serpentine in *Southland Tales* also functions in much this way in relation to Orientalized, "exotic" Asian stereotypes.

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Bridging Afrofuturism and Arab SF: Locating the Contemporary Algerian SF within the Postcolonial Speculative Fiction

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Abstract | Afrofuturism synthesizes Science Fiction (SF) with African attributes resulting in a cultural celebration through futuristic visions encompassing popular art forms including literature, music, cinema, etc. Nevertheless, the term has inherently been associated with black Africa, disregarding the remaining ethnic and racial groups within the same continent. Intriguingly, black authors comprise the exclusive producers of any artistic work associated with Afrofuturism despite the potential enrichment that nonblack African cultures may add to the subgenre. This paper explores the reasons behind the unshared influence of the black diaspora SF authorship on their African counterparts, particularly apparent in the themes treating racial and gender issues. This article also examines the similarities and differences between Arab SF and the African one in order to situate Algerian SF within the postcolonial SF scene in general, and Afrofuturism in particular. To achieve such purposes, this paper juxtaposes Arab SF with Afrofuturism by reflecting on their colonial and postcolonial experiences respectively. Moreover, we inquire about the intriguing lack of such literary

endeavour in the Arab world, specifically in North Africa, taking into consideration the historical commonalities witnessed throughout the continent, which should have promoted similar artistic expressions.

Keywords | Science fiction; Postcolonial; Afrofuturism; Arab SF; Algerian SF.

Resumo | O Afrofuturismo sintetiza a Ficção Científica (FC) com atributos africanos, resultando numa celebração cultural através de visões futurísticas que englobam formas de arte popular como a literatura, a música, o cinema, entre outros. No entanto, este termo tem vindo a ser intrinsecamente associado à África negra, pondo de parte outros grupos étnicos no continente. Curiosamente, toda a produção artística relacionada ao Afrofuturismo é criada exclusivamente por autores negros, apesar do potencial enriquecimento que culturas africanas não negras poderiam oferecer ao subgénero. Este artigo explora as razões por detrás da ausência de partilha de influências entre a diáspora de FC negra e a restante autoria africana, algo que é particularmente evidente em temas que lidam com questões raciais e de género. Este artigo examina também as semelhanças e diferenças entre a FC árabe e africana, por forma a situar a FC Argelina no espectro da FC pós-colonial em geral e no Afrofuturismo em particular. Assim, este artigo justapõe a FC Árabe com o Afrofuturismo ao refletir sobre as suas respetivas experiências coloniais e pós-coloniais. Adicionalmente, questiona-se a estranha ausência deste impulso literário no mundo árabe, concretamente na África do Norte, tendo em consideração as semelhanças históricas existentes por todo o continente que deveriam ter impulsionado expressões artísticas similares.

Palavras Chave | Ficção científica; Pós-colonialismo; Afrofuturismo; FC Árabe; FC Argelina.

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Introduction

Owing to its boundless ingenuity and compelling aesthetics for over two hundred years of existence, Science Fiction (SF) expanded into several subgenres attracting writers from different backgrounds. One of its modern literary strands is Afrofuturism, a compound term alluding to an African pertinence and a concern for the future. Nevertheless, contributions by black African writers within the body of Afrofuturist works are predominant. Tracing its origins in the African American literary scene and later on appropriated by their African counterparts, scholars chiefly associate

Afrofuturism with black authorship disregarding the potential enrichment that nonblack African cultures may have added to it, especially the ones in the North African region.[1]

It is worth mentioning that Afrofuturism writers are predominantly black, upholding their racial identity together with their history of slavery and alienation as distinctive factors on which the subgenre stands. However, this does not substantiate an exclusive association of Afrofuturism with blackness, considering that the "Afro" part of its compound name is under no circumstances interchangeable with the latter.[2] In academia, there are some apparent attempts to delimitate Afrofuturism exclusively to black narratives, and seminal texts dedicated to defining and exploring the genre act as evidence for such claim. For instance, in *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013), Ytasha L. Womack delineates the role of Afrofuturists declaring, "Whether through literature, visual arts, music, or grassroots organizing, Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future" (7). Womack instinctively disqualifies nonblack Africans' relevancy to the subgenre. Further, in *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-blackness* (2015), scholar Anderson Reynaldo identifies a new wave of the subgenre describing it as "the early twenty-first century techno genesis of Black identity reflecting counter histories…" (10). Anderson adds an updated definition, which for the most part, fails at acknowledging a broader and more inclusive perception of Afrofuturism. Moreover, the marginalizing of nonblack African SF authors is remarkably noticeable in most Afrofuturist anthologies. To illustrate this, we reviewed the lists of contributors from three notable works including Ivor W. Hartmann's SF series *AfroSF: Science Fiction by African Writers* (2012-2018), Billy Kahora's *Imagine Africa 500* (2016), and Bill Campbell and Edward Hall's *Mothership: Tales from Afrofuturism and Beyond* (2016). The anthologies share between them eighty-five contributors among which we could identify only one Arab writer[3] and no North African ones, hence demonstrating editorial choices that do not actively recognize North African/Arab writers as integral to Afrofuturism.

This has resulted in an ironic situation. On the one hand, Afrofuturism is a subgenre that essentially delves into issues of discrimination and differences, and on

[1] The region consists of Arab speaking countries including Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, Mauritania and Egypt.

[2] North African countries account for 18.14% of the continent's population. See https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/northern-africa-population/

[3] Rabih Alameddine is a Lebanese writer and the only Arab contributor in Bill Campbell and Edward Hall's *Mothership: Tales from Afrofuturism and Beyond (2016).*

the other hand, Afrofuturism scholars tend to overlook nonblack African SF contributions. Thus, not only contradicting the movement's core objectives but also ignoring the foundations of contemporary SF, the latter proved to have apparent affinities with postcolonial literature. In the same line of thought, novelist Adam Roberts elucidates on the role of SF in modern societies and the characteristics that connect the latter with postcolonial literature by arguing that:

> [...] the key symbolic function of the SF novum [4] is precisely the representation of the encounter with difference, Otherness, alterity…in societies such as ours where Otherness is often demonized, SF can pierce the constraints of this ideology by circumventing the conventions of traditional fiction… an end that postcolonial literature shares. (28)

Although Roberts addresses the whole genre, Afrofuturism as a subgenre produced exclusively by diaspora and postcolonial subjects has proven to be even more embracing of his words. However, in order to understand how Afrofuturism connects western SF and Postcolonial literature, one must look further into their similarities.

One of the most apparent commonalities between SF and postcolonial literature is that they were both subject to academic oversight. For decades, scholars labelled both subgenres as being literarily unaesthetic assuming that they were both destined for unsophisticated readers, merely meant to entertain, in the case of SF, or to address colonial histories from a postcolonial viewpoint. Fortunately, by the second half of the 20th century, both fields witnessed a major surge of practitioners and theorists who constructed their contributions to the subgenres on previously established philosophies, mythology, and literary traditions. This resulted in the advent of two politically and socially motivated literary trends with unequivocal academic merit and esteem. The shared themes and concepts between the two practices constitute the common grounds that define both subgenres, demonstrating an unparalleled display of sympathy with the "marginal and the different" (Roberts 18). Eventually, such similarities appealed to audiences consisting mainly of science enthusiasts and postcolonial zealots, who later on tactfully merged both fields in a new form known as Afrofuturism. The latter functioned as a distinct tool conjoining subject matters in both fields. Interestingly, critical SF works stress the perpetuation of imperial practices, racism, and gender discrimination, arguing that no matter how advanced the human race may become,

[4] A term used by SF scholar Darko Suvin in his *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979) to describe the scientifically plausible innovations used by SF narratives.

prejudices and exploitation would never cease unless thoughtful social remediation takes place, which is a similarly omnipresent idea in Postcolonial studies.

Afrofuturism: Past and Present

Bringing together distinctive traits of SF with African cultural attributes, Afrofuturism is an artful celebration of the African history through futuristic visions that are consistently aware of their past and present while encompassing every modern art forms including literature, music, cinema, fashion, painting, etc. The emanation of the Afrofuturist movement is difficult to determine due to the numerous instances of the latter in works dating as far back as the second half of the 19th century. Notably, Martin Delany's *Blake or the Huts of America* (1859) is a proto-SF novel described by prominent African-American SF author Samuel R. Delany as "about as close to an SF-style alternate history novel as you can get" ("Racism and Science Fiction"), and his work is widely acknowledged as the first SF novel published by an African American. Furthermore, prolific novelist Pauline Hopkins published *Of One Blood* (1902), fictionalizing a technologically advanced and culturally superior Ethiopia, treating racial issues and diverse social issues in a pioneering fashion intending to "raise the stigma of degradation from [the Black] race" (13). Her work remains an important proto-SF feminist novel that inspired future generations of African SF writers. This reveals the extent to which SF resonates with African diaspora authors, offering them a unique platform on which they can transcribe their past and present concerns, while speculating on alternative realities or future expectations. Other leading figures who explored the possibilities SF had to offer to African American authorship are Sutton Griggs, Frances Harper,[5] and acclaimed Harlem Renaissance figure W. E. B. Du Bois, only to mention a few.

Despite the enduring relation between SF and African American writers, amid a white-dominated genre, their efforts were often unacknowledged. While the aforementioned works were authentic attempts in dealing with the fractured racial realities of the time, they were also a response to the virulent racist ideologies found in a plethora of 19th century SF, predominantly based on the pseudoscientific superiority

[5] See: Griggs, Sutton E. *Imperium in Imperio*. Modern Library, 2003; and Harper, Frances E. W, and Koritha Mitchell. Iola Leroy: Or, Shadows Uplifted. Broadview Press, 2018.

of the Caucasians. For instance, Louis Tracy's *The Final War* (1896), and King Wallace's *The Next War: A Prediction* (1892) are conspicuous examples of the pervasive white supremacist frame of mind that prevailed during that period. Both novels revolved around the premise of a black insurrection against the whites and its ensuing fears, predicting an inevitable racial war as the sole outcome. Unfortunately, this malign racial bigotry in SF did not abate in the following decades. In the same line of thought, scholar Gregory E. Rutledge claims that "… the systemic racism of the FFF [Futurist Fiction and Fantasy] industry that persisted for many years, among other things, the resulting cosmology of constraint limited and limits the exploratory aspirations of many (diasporic) Africans" (236). Such prevalent restrictions ironically proved only to incite African writers to appropriate the genre and transcend its boundaries by employing its idiosyncrasies to serve the postcolonial literary narratives.

At the peak of the pulp fiction era during the early decades of the 20th century, fiction was flourishing, particularly SF. The pay-per-word tradition of the pulp magazines, which indulged quantity at the expense of quality, led to the emergence of a myriad of SF productions. However, racial representation in SF was remarkably missing due to two notable factors, the first one being the racial views and tensions of that time, and the second one is the low number of SF works by Black authors who hardly managed to obtrude the highly white-dominated field. In 1920, acclaimed African American writer and social activist W. E. B. Du Bois published a short SF story entitled *The Comet*. The story depicts the intricate relationship between a black man and a white woman as the last surviving humans after a comet collided with planet Earth unleashing deadly toxic gases. Du Bois depicted a near future post-apocalyptic vision imbued with social and racial themes that remain to this day relevant. Yet, he was not the only Harlem Renaissance figure to find an inventive story-telling platform in the SF genre. A decade later, George S. Schuyler published what would be later considered the first true Afrofuturist novel *Black no more* (1931), a poignant satirical account in which a black man becomes white through a scientific transformation process. Du Bois and Schuyler's SF efforts remain among their most memorable productions, inspiring the future African American generation of writers to explore even further the possibilities the genre has to offer to the diaspora communities in terms of an aesthetic social expression.

In the second half of 20th century, postcolonial theories became one of the most dominant academic frame of thoughts. Not long after regaining independence, intellectual voices arose in celebration of their history and native cultures, whilst condemning the atrocities inflicted by western imperialism. This led to a shift in attitudes in their motherlands, especially among the diaspora communities. Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, and Homi Bhabha, among many others, instilled the structures of postcolonial studies through landmark theories such as otherness, hybridity, diaspora, etc. [6] SF writings explored similar ideas throughout its history. For instance, xenophobia, estrangement, and colonialism are recurring themes that date back to the early works of Mary Shelley, Jules Verne and H.G Wells. Thus, it was natural for many diaspora and postcolonial writers to take interest in a genre that shares such central subject matters, eventually broadening its scopes to different unexplored grounds by implementing their own cultures, history and social experiences.

Decidedly, the most remarkable feature of SF is its ability to meld with other genres, since it is common for SF authors to combine their futuristic plots with different literary genres such as adventure, horror, romance, etc. Even though this is not idiosyncratic to the genre, the fact that it offers unfathomable prospects attracted writers from all backgrounds who found in it creative ways to subtly discuss present-day's most challenging themes. Unarguably, such distinct traits resonated with postcolonial writers who profited from the genre's flexibility, not by simple appropriation, but through establishing a distinct subgenre known as Afrofuturism. Illustrator Tim Fielder defines it as "a mode of operation in which you take any kind of action…and infuse it with Afrocentricity" (00:35-00:50). Fielder's delimitation of Afrofuturism to Afrocentricity seemingly does not exclude anyone who falls under the umbrella of the latter. Yet, African countries with chiefly black populations and similar diaspora communities are solely associated with the term, except for few names originating mainly from South Africa who managed to claim status within the circle. For example, award-winning novelist Lauren Beukes, despite being white, is often shortlisted as an Afrofuturist writer and widely praised for her social commentary about issues related to race and gender in Africa even though this association remains an infrequent case. Moreover,

[6] See: Said, E.W. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. Penguin Books Limited, 2016; Fanon, F. et al. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Grove Press, 2008; Bhabha, Homi K. The Location of Culture. London: Routledge, 1994.

when dealing with the remaining various ethnic and racial groups within the continent, particularly in the north where the majority of its inhabitants are of Berber descent identifying as Arabs,[7] Afrofuturism takes a one-dimensional understanding of its Afrocentricity discarding the contributions of the latter from its bodies of work. A problematic situation, given the fact that both Arab speculative literary tradition and the African one have proved to have much in common.

The History of Arab Science Fiction

It is difficult to determine the exact period in which Arab Science Fiction (ASF) emerged since the genre, just like in the west, overlapped with previous literary traditions (Campbell 50). Since ancient times, Arab literature has incorporated fantastic elements in several renowned works that still stand noteworthy today such as *One Thousand and One Nights* (1704).[8] In *الخيال العلمي في الأدب* (*The Imaginary Science in Literature*) (1994), literary critic Muhammed Azzam defines ASF as any writing by Arabs that blended popular philosophies and theological principles related to creation to come up with a plausible basis for proto-SF works (14). Such a form of writing has undoubtedly taken an already existing vast reservoir of fantasy-oriented literary tradition as its main foundation while considering themes related to Arabness as a central focus. Further, identifiable proto-SF components are distinct in *Aja'ib* or Mirabilia literature, a form of writing in which Arabs coupled science and speculative literature.

Throughout the Middle Ages, Arabs witnessed remarkable scientific advancements in various domains, and this reflected on their literature that often sought to meld knowledge, religion and scientific discoveries within speculative tales. For example, works by the prominent Arab author Al Jahiz introduced Islamic tropes to Aja'ib literature in numerous works that include *كتاب الحيوان* (*The Book of Animals*)[9] and *كتاب البيان و التبين* (*The Book of Eloquence and Demonstration*) (Campbell 50). Yet, Zākāriya ibn Muḥammad al-Qazwīni's *عجائب المخلوقات وغرائب الموجودات* (*Wonders of Creation and Oddities of Existence*),[10] based on earlier renowned works from 12th

[7] For more information about North African Berber heritage, see: www.britannica.com/topic/Berber.
[8] Also called *The Arabian Nights,* it is a collection of Middle Eastern and Indian tales of uncertain authorships.
[9] The first known mention of the book appears in a text by the Arab philosopher Al-Kindī (d. 850).
[10] Zakarīyā Ibn Muhammad al-Qazwīnī (c. 1203–83) there is no precise date of publication of his manuscript

century texts, remains the most representational of Mirabilia literature. Furthermore, Ibn al-Nafis' *Theologus Autodidactus*[11] and tales like *Sindbad the Sailor* are examples of a rich proto-SF Arab tradition that later attracted considerable academic attention (50). Additionally, Ada Barbaro[12] argues that despite the interest of ASF in the fantastic, which contradicts the tropes of western SF that aimed for plausibility and credibility, there were still some comparable features such as the descriptions of physically and temporally distant worlds, demonstrating an unarguable similitude between the two traditions.

Admittedly, contemporary ASF suffers from an acute lack of interest from both academic and popular readership, positioning it considerably behind its western counterpart. In 2013, a group of journalists, authors, and academics gathered in the fifth edition of *Nour Festival*,[13] under the slogan "Reimagining ASF", to discuss the reasons behind the neglect of the genre in Arab world. During the event, speaker Ziauddin Sardar argued that such disregard for SF in the Arab and Muslim societies today is, in fact, indicative of their technological decline. Moreover, Sardar believes that contrary to the premise of SF, which reflects on present-day apprehensions and concerns via progressive and futuristic narratives, Arab literature is "backwards-looking," (apud. El-Mohtar) mostly focusing on past glories. In contrast, El-Mohtar argues, "the legacy of colonization in the Middle-East was a force to be reckoned with when writing science fiction—that science fiction is as much about curating the past as it is about imagining the future, and that the latter is not possible without the former" ("From Sindbad to Sci-Fi"). El-Mohtar's insight on how historical consideration can edify contemporary ASF goes along with the principles of Afrofuturist literature, in which authors essentially construct their narratives based on their history and past experiences. Apart from this, Yasmin Khan suggests that "the Muslim psyche is craving new types of stories — ones that can inspire and empower the co-creation of more inclusive futures" (apud. Ansar). In other words, only a proliferation in ASF can remedy the lack of representation of Muslims and Arabs in SF, with works imbued with positive portrayals far from the exotic otherness and stereotyping of most Western SF.

[11] This novel was written sometime between 1268 and 1277.
[12] Author of *La Fantascienza Nella Letteratura Araba* (2013)
[13] An annual festival held in London celebrating contemporary art, film, literature, music and performance from the Middle East and North Africa.

Nevertheless, navigating between religious beliefs and SF elements such as time travel, extra-terrestrial life forms, parallel universes, etc., could be controversial due to the religious constraints that at times can contradict the aforementioned SF fundamentals. Yasser Bahjat[14] believes that the lack of mediatisation and religious censorship are currently the primary obstacles to the progress of SF in the Arab world (apud. Morayef). Despite the dictated limitations, some ASF authors are redefining the genre with works transcending gender and political discrimination. For instance, artist Larissa Sansour co-directed the SF short film *In the Future, They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2016), through which she expresses her views as a Palestinian vis-à-vis the Israeli occupation and its ensuing effect on her peoples' heritage. Charged with political commentary, the film explores themes of identity and belonging. Similarly, Iraqi SF anthology *Iraq + 100* (2016) is a collection of ten stories imagining how the country will look like in a hundred years after the US invasion in 2003. Speaking about the book, co-editor Hassan Blasim declared that "it was difficult to persuade many Iraqi writers to write stories set in the future when they were already so busy writing about the cruelty, horror and shock of the present, or trying to delve into the past to reread Iraq's former nightmares and glories" (Blasim). Yet, contributors succeeded in delivering SF narratives covering a vast array of themes envisioning the country's future, while providing an Iraqi perspective on its current situation.

From a golden age replete with proto-SF tropes to its present-day inadequacy, ASF is reinventing itself to meet the standards of contemporary SF by exploring the futuristic horizons of Arab communities who are much in need of onward looking perspectives. SF has not only found proliferation in the Middle East but has also reverberated in North Africa, noticeably in Algeria, where the genre is increasing in popularity.

The Emergence of Algerian SF

During the colonial occupation of Algeria, speculative fiction witnessed a pervasive lull as an idiosyncratic anti-colonial thematic that marked most of the literature of that time. As a result, there are no documented instances of the Algerian SF genre during that period. It was not until the post-independence era that the first

[14] ASF author and co-founder of Yatakhayaloon, a league of authors and readers founded in 2012 to promote the subgenre.

published works in the genre emerged, namely Safia Ketou's collection of short stories *The Mauve Planet* (1983). While the bulk of Algerian SF is relatively scarce in comparison to its African/Arab counterparts, the recent decades marked an increase in the numbers of Algerian writers venturing in the genre, attracting a well welcoming readership, enticed by the prospects of relatable SF narratives.

Laureate of the prestigious Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in 2011, Prix du Roman Arabe in 2012,[15] and Le Grand Prix Du Roman De l'Académie Française in 2015, former Algerian official Boualem Sansal is a controversial novelist known for his harsh criticism of the Arab theocracies and the support they receive from the supposedly democratic western countries. In an interview Sansal declared that "Bouteflika[16] est un autocrate de la pire espèce […] C'est pourtant lui que les grandes démocraties occidentales soutiennent…" (Hammouche),[17] Sansal's worldviews are certainly apparent in his most acclaimed novel *2084: the end of the world* (2015). Sansal's opus is a tribute to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Set in a similarly dystopian setting, the narrative delves into the malfeasance and deception of autocratic and religiously extremist regimes that reject any form of nonconformist thoughts. The story unfolds within the established kingdom of *Abistan* after a nuclear holocaust, a satirical representation of present-day radical Islamic states, led by Abi, the prophet of the god *Yolah*, and assisted by the *Just Brotherhood* congregation whom he created to enforce his teachings. Abi's vision of a new era where "another world had been born, on an earth that was cleansed, devoted to truth, beneath the gazes of God and of Abi; everything must be renamed, everything must be rewritten" (Sansal 13), exemplifies a fictional radical theocracy that might not be far from present-day reality. For instance, in the novel, punishments to any form of heresy are carried through either public beheadings or death by stoning performed in dedicated stadiums, mirroring the harsh truth and extreme practices in some contemporary Islamic states. After his encounter with a secret group of freethinkers, the protagonist Ati, along with his friend

[15] The prize money was withdrawn due to Sansal's visit to Israel to speak at the Jerusalem Writers Festival. See Toi, et al. "Award-Winning Algerian Author Denied Cash Prize for Visiting Israel." *The Times of Israel*, 30 June 2012, www.timesofisrael.com/known-algerian-writer-denied-cash-prize-after-visiting-israel/.

[16] Former Algerian president for four consecutive terms between 1999 and 2019, he resigned after nationwide protests erupted against his candidature for a fifth term.

[17] "Boutaflika is an autocrat of the worst kind […] though it is him that the largest western democracies support". Translation done by the author.

Koa, embark on an intriguing investigation to penetrate the mysteries of *Abistan*, just to unveil the unfathomable historical and religious distortions on which the reign of totalitarianism operates. Overall, bearing one of the most enduring traits of SF, namely a vision of a plausible future, Sansal's dystopia is a blend of satire, polemics and futurist literature that paints a daring outlook on North African social and religious history. The novel received numerous critical accolades from esteemed literary magazines. For instance, *The Times Literary Supplement* describes it as being a "…abhorrence of a system that controls people's minds, explaining that the religion was not originally evil but has been corrupted. A moving and cautionary story", while *The Guardian* praised it as "A powerful novel that celebrates resistance" (Hazelton). Such recognition can only attest to the literary merit contemporary Algerian SF can achieve.

For a better understanding of the condition of SF in Algeria, we conducted an interview with Abderezzak Touahria, another passionate Algerian SF author, who to this day wrote three novels in the genre. Albeit writing exclusively in Arabic, Touahria professes that he drew substantial inspiration from Jules Verne's[18] works. Notably, in 2019 Touahria won the President's Award for his latest work *شيفا مخطوطة القرن الصغير* (*Shiva the Manuscript of the Little Horn*) (2018), which also earned him an invitation to participate in the 2018 *International Science Fiction Conference* in France at Jules Verne's house. The events of the novel revolve around a twenty-nine-year-old Biology graduate, Ishaq Jamili, a son of a Russian mother and an Algerian father. Pursuing his keen interest in studying mysterious natural phenomena, shortly after his graduation Ishaq decides to join a group of Russian researchers in a scientific expedition to explore Antarctica. Along with his companion Tanya, they find themselves involved in a series of mysterious encounters leading them down to the second layer of the Earth called the mantel, where they unveil shocking revelations about the history of humankind and the existence of other races, the all, disclosed within the *Shiva Manuscript*. The narrative introduces readers to intriguing and strange worlds while founding its premise on several modern scientific theories.

During the interview, Touahria stated that he has chosen SF "since it provides futuristic readings based on current events", adding that "…the genre liberates the

[18] Prolific French author whose writings laid much of the foundation of modern Science fiction.

authors' as well as the readers' imagination with what goes in line with the prevailing theories in the scientific community," (Touahria), a defining feature of Hard SF.[19]

Contrastingly, his approach to the genre is rather a rare occurrence in the fantasy-oriented Arab and African SF writings as they often tend to verge into the Science Fantasy[20] subgenre and his aforementioned work attests to such idiosyncrasy. As an Arab-Muslim author, Touahria is well aware of the cultural and religious constraints his craft may face. Speaking of which, he argues that:

> The most challenging difficulties that I have faced in our Arab Muslim community is the issue of restricting my imagination and not exceeding the values of religion, customs and traditions, which have a sensitive place in our society. Therefore, I had to navigate around such elements in order to earn my readership. (Touahria)

Touahria carried on suggesting a solution for such creative shackles, adding "...the Arab and Muslim culture could act more as a distinguishing element rather than a limiting one, thus giving SF an Islamic dimension that could bring more validity to the genre since it has a logical aspect, mostly apparent in the holy *Quran*."[21] Finally, Touahria expressed his intentions to translate his works to English in order to export and promote Algerian SF with the hope of inspiring future generations of Algerian writers to venture into the genre.

Locating the Algerian SF within the Afrofuturist Discourse

While the origins of Arab and African SF may seem distant, the postcolonial conditions of both cultures inspired similarities in their concerns and motives. Admittedly, both subgenres aptly transcended basic mimicry of the established western SF by providing a quintessential uniqueness to the genre drawing much from central cultural elements such as religion, folklore, and traditions, thus earning an undeniable place in the body of SF.

Interestingly, North African SF in general and the Algerian one in particular, constitute some kind of a middle ground where both trends coalesce. Overall, Algerian

[19] Hard SF is a category of science fiction characterized by the concern for scientific accuracy and logic.
[20] A mixed genre that simultaneously combines tropes and elements from both science fiction and fantasy.
[21] Touahria is referring to the study and analysis of scientific principles within the *Quran.* See Abu Ammaar Yasir Qadhi's *An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qu'ran* (1999) and Faisal Fahim's *The Quran: (With Scientific Facts)* (2013).

literature stands as an exemplar of a tradition that blurs the confines of belonging to a specific literary cluster. In fact, several Algerian authors who excelled in both Arabic and French literature, are often recognized as Africans, yet this is not the case when it comes to Algerian SF. As mentioned earlier, B. Sansal, Abderezzak Touahria, as well as others like Sherif Arbouz[22] and Riadh Hadir,[23] are Algerian SF authors who chose the genre as their main artistic outlet. One can relate the motivation behind such choice to the limitless horizons and versatility of plot construction SF offers. The authors' substantial exposure to SF in written and film forms is undoubtedly another instrumental factor that lead to the production of authentic SF in the sense of the genre's definitional elements and originality of plots that directly contextualize the Arab, Muslim and Algerian worlds within futuristic settings.

Nonetheless, after analysing the themes imbued within Algerian SF, we found out that such narratives are not associated with Afrofuturism but rather with Arab SF, a possible reason behind such disassociation could be the lack of focus on racial discrimination, a central theme in Afrofuturist works. Indeed, North African countries did not experience slavery and displacement, at least not to the same extent as the black African regions, and these historical disparities, which are recurrent subjects in Afrofuturist literature, create a rupture between Arab SF and Afrofuturism. However, Algerian SF can connect both traditions, if considered from a locational and historical perspective. The country's geographical placement, colonial past and cultural history belonging to the Arab and African worlds, provides original and raw material that can forge distinctive SF narratives, simultaneously offering a broader creative scope for the Afrofuturist tradition, while helping redress the declining Arab SF scene.

Conclusion

By the turn of the 21st century, Afrofuturism and Arab SF evolved into a postcolonial tour de force by producing literary traditions that transcend the boundaries of the conventional imitation and appropriation of a western genre. Established in the African American diaspora literature, the Afrofuturist movement found unequivocal resonance in the African continent and beyond. The implementation of long-lasting pre-

[22] Author of *La Fantastique Odyssée* (*The Fantastic Odyssey*) (2011), and *La Grande Énigme* (*The Great Enigma*) (2012).
[23] Author of the dystopian SF novel *Pupille* (2017).

and postcolonial concerns and the cultural heritage onto futuristic settings elevated the SF genres to unexplored and exciting heights. As revealed previously, Arab SF shares a similarly rich experience with its African counterpart. Contemporary Arab SF writers are equally aware of the unique contribution their culture could bring to the genre. However, geographical placement and, more importantly, racial differences make the association of the Arab SF and Afrofuturism an unlikely one, bringing us to the argument of this paper which is the necessity to acknowledge Algerian SF, generally thought of as part of Arab SF, as belonging to the Afrofuturist genre as well. Algeria shares comparable historical aspects with most African countries, namely, western colonialism and the ensuing postcolonial conditions. Algerian SF writers, as others from all over the continent, expressed their views on the past and their concerns for the future of their cultural and racial identities through inventive texts that melded history, cultures and futuristic settings. Despite the cultural heritage that conventionally categorizes Algerian SF writers as belonging solely to the Arab world, their Africanness, which transcends single racial classifications, must incite an active recognition within the subgenre by including Algerian SF in the body of Afrofuturism, whether in anthologies, magazines, courses, etc., consequently, establishing a remarkable connection between the Arab and African SF.

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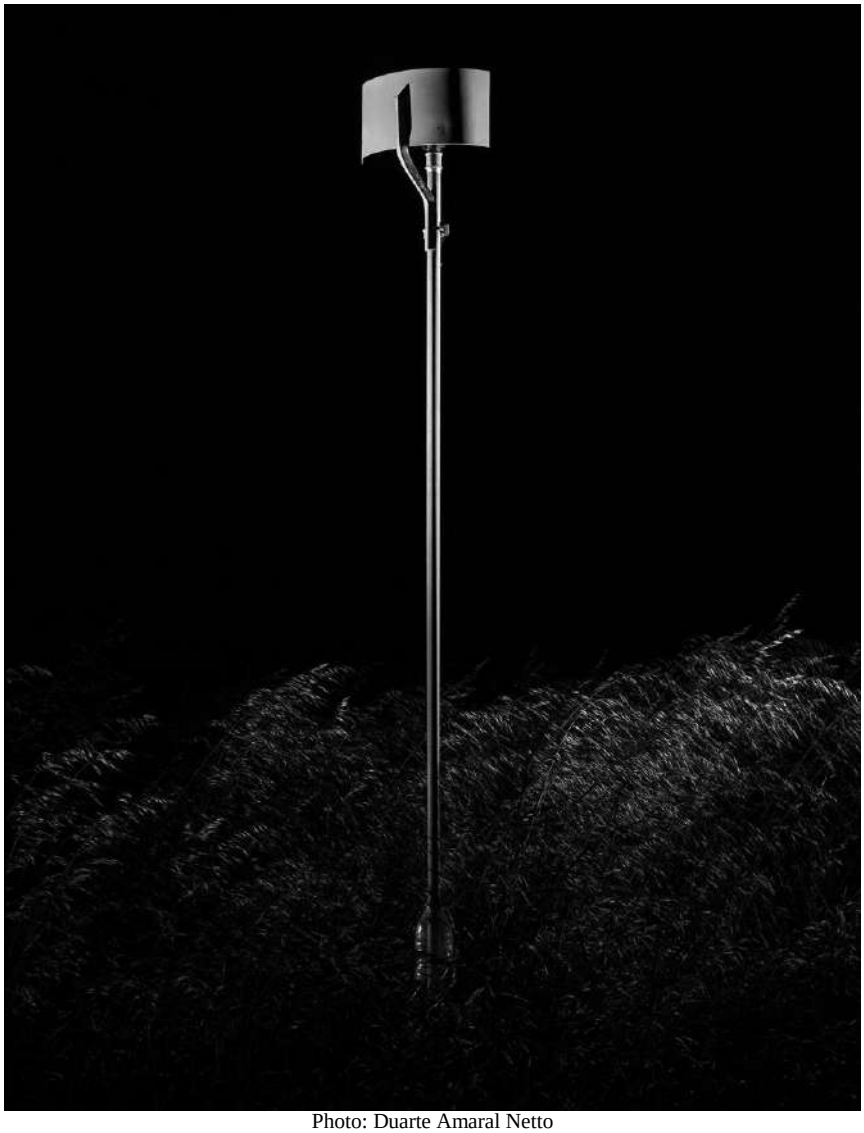

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Navigating the Stars: Thinking the Present and Projecting the Future by Looking at the Past

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Abstract | This essay aims to discuss how science fiction works, namely adaptations of adventure classics, can allow us to think about the present by looking at the past. It begins by providing a definition of concepts such as steampunk and neo-Victorianism and explaining why they are relevant in this context. It then focuses on the analysis of the movie *Treasure Planet* (2002) as a steampunk adaptation of Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883), highlighting the various aspects that link the two works, as well as the ones that set them apart. Ultimately, this essay seeks to address the retrofuturistic nature of steampunk narratives of this kind, finishing with a reflection on how this particular

work can be but one example of a narrative that chooses to display the present by rethinking the past and projecting the future.

Keywords | steampunk; retrofuturism; neo-Victorianism; *Treasure Planet*; *Treasure Island.*

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Resumo | O presente ensaio visa discutir a forma como obras de ficção científica, nomeadamente que adaptem clássicos de aventura, podem permitir pensar no presente, olhando para o passado. Começa por apresentar uma definição de conceitos tais como *steampunk* e neovitorianismo, bem como explicar a sua importância neste contexto. Centra-se, depois, na análise do filme *Planeta do Tesouro* (2002) enquanto adaptação *steampunk* da *Ilha do Tesouro* (1883) de Stevenson, destacando os vários aspetos que ligam e distinguem as duas obras. Em suma, este ensaio procura abordar a natureza retrofuturista das narrativas *steampunk* deste tipo, terminando com uma reflexão sobre como esta obra em particular pode ser apenas um dos exemplos de uma narrativa que opta por mostrar o presente repensando o passado e projetando o futuro.

Palavras-Chave | *steampunk*; retrofuturismo; neovitorianismo; *Planeta do Tesouro*, *Ilha do Tesouro.*

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Utopia, Neo-Victorianism, and Steampunk

Even though people have been projecting idealizations of the perfect society since the dawn of time, it was only with Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) that this unnamed notion became linked with the term. At the time of its coining by More, *utopia* "derived from a play on two Greek words, 'good place' and 'no place,' 'utopia' and its variants, utopian and utopianism, are almost always associated, even when the specific vision is considered appealing, with the impractical, the unrealistic, and the impossible." (Gordon 362) But if it is true that the practice of conceiving a utopia had been around before, it is also true that it developed beyond the meaning attributed by More. As is stated by Vieira:

> The word utopia has itself often been used as the root for the formation of new words. These include words such as eutopia, dystopia, anti-utopia, alotopia, euchronia, heterotopia, ecotopia and hyperutopia, which are, in fact, derivation neologisms. And with the creation of every new associated word the concept of utopia took on a more precise meaning. (3)

In the same way, when Foucault speaks of utopia, he also speaks of its derivations, focusing on other spaces, or rather, heterotopias, a concept that he explains through the image of the mirror:

> The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror (24)

Considering that mirrored images are intrinsically linked with utopian views, this explanation becomes very relevant since, as a matter of fact and not coincidentally, the image of the mirror (more specifically the rearview mirror) is a very well-liked metaphor amongst neo-Victorian scholars, for when we turn to the Victorian Era:

> we never really encounter 'the Victorians' themselves but instead a mediated image like the one we get when we glance into our rearview mirrors while driving. The image usefully condenses the paradoxical sense of looking forward to see what is behind us, which is the opposite of what we do when we read history in order to figure out the future. It also suggests something of the inevitable distortion that accompanies any mirror image, whether we see it as resulting from the effects of political ideology, deliberate misreading, exaggeration, or the understandable simplification of a complex past. (Joyce 4)

As such, Neo-Victorianism exists as a cultural and literary trend and it started being developed as a field of study that surfaced from revivalist tendencies that draw from the Victorian Period and seek to recover this era in some way.[1] (Ramos, "Neovitorianismo" n.pg) As for neo-Victorian fiction, Llewellyn defines it as "those works which are consciously set in the Victorian period (…), or which desire to re-write the historical narrative of that period by representing marginalized voices, new histories of sexuality, post-colonial viewpoints and other generally 'different' versions of the Victorian." (165) The importance of this definition comes from the emphasis on criticism that is the basis of neo-Victorianism, for despite the tendency to label the wish to look back as utopian, it "is as much about criticism and critical thought as it is about

[1] Paraphrased from Portuguese original, own translation.

the creative, re-visionary impulses towards the historical found in contemporary literature, art, TV adaptations, or the heritage industry." (Llewellyn 179)

One of the appeals of creating fiction set in a past time like the Victorian Era, besides the much-praised aesthetic motifs, is the opportunity to deal with contemporary problems in a non-contemporary setting. Transporting modernity into alien settings allows for the possibility to highlight by contrast our own values and assumptions, making it easier to tackle complex ethical questions and explore sensitive matters openly. (Heilmann and Llewellyn 10) Another important aspect of neo-Victorianism is the (critical) revere of technological advancement, and it is through this facet that neo-Victorianism is reflected in the steampunk trend.

The term *steampunk* was coined by sci-fi writer K. W. Jeter in 1987 when talking to *Locus* magazine. The author used it to refer to works of fiction inspired by 19th century scientific and technological advances: "Personally, I think Victorian fantasies are going to be the next big thing, as long as we can come up with a fitting collective term… like 'steampunks,' perhaps." (Jeter quoted in VanderMeer and Chambers 48) Though it started by referring to literary works, the trend grew popular in the 1990s and evolved into a subcultural movement; when associated with fiction today, it stands as a subgenre of science-fiction. While *steam* refers to the steam power of the Industrial Revolution, *punk* evokes a social component related to the musical movement of the same name, a call for action and individuality associated with rebellion, characteristic of the subculture.

As a cultural and aesthetic movement, steampunk stands for marking a difference and asserting one's identity through a specific style that combines traditional Victorian and Gothic trends with Punk elements. VanderMeer and Chambers identify some key motifs, namely, a varied range of gadgets like goggles and pocket-watches, top hats, corsets, aviator jackets, etc., (132, 138) some of these elements can also define the characters of fictional works of this kind. Besides this distinctive fashion style, steampunk narratives can be recognized by a series of elements, from which we can highlight: engines, gears, mechanical prosthetics, steam power, and clockwork mechanisms (steam engines, airships, submarines, time machines, weapons, gadgets) (49, 53). This subgenre is also known for its typical character tropes: the mad

scientist/inventor, the adventurer/explorer, the magician/psychic, and the detective (9). [2]

Furthermore, as a branch of neo-Victorianism, one of the ways in which steampunk allows for critical readings of both Victorian and Contemporary trends is through the exploitation of the bridges between the Industrial and Digital Revolutions. This is mainly accomplished by conveying perceptions of the future in both eras and presenting arguments about technology's potentialities, which is but one of steampunk's many alluring pillars, both in fiction and the movement it spawned. Steampunk is thus simultaneously retro and forward-looking in nature, it also evokes a sense of adventure and discovery, and embraces divergent and extinct technologies as a way of talking about the future (VanderMeer and Chambers 9). Therefore, I will now look at the steampunk animation movie *Treasure Planet* (2002) in order to understand how the movie functions as a mirrored image of the past that reflects the present and through which we can think about the future.

Adapting *Treasure Island*

One of the most direct ways to address the present in the past is through adaptation, which Julie Sanders defines as "reinterpretations of established texts in new generic contexts or perhaps with relocations of an 'original text' or source text's cultural and/or temporal setting, which may or may not involve a generic shift." (19) In this case, *Treasure Planet* is regarded as an adaptation, not only because it constitutes a transposition from novel to movie, but also because it makes a cultural and temporal relocation of the source text. *Treasure Island,* by Scottish author Robert Louis Stevenson, was first published as a novel in 1883 (Lowne and Stewart n.pg.) and it targeted young boys who might be prone to one day be a part of the leading forces of the British Empire.[3]

Though the work is well known for being a classic children's adventure novel, it hides a deeper meaning. In *Treasure Island,* we follow young Jim Hawkins as he embarks on a journey to try and assert his identity as a gentleman. He intends to do so by going on an overseas adventure and serving the British Empire, however, in the end,

[2] All of these tropes can de embodied in characters that are purely fictional, based on real figures, or even, based on famous literary figures from the Victorian Era.
[3] Many early editions, including the first one, had a preface entitled "to the hesitant purchaser" meant to attract young boys with promises of great adventures.

he is left with no treasure and no sense of self. Thus, what may on the surface look like a simple invitation to pursue adventure, ends up being a warning against the dangers of the Empire, the errors of colonization, and the impossibility of thriving in the heart of a degenerate and corrupt society. Through the familiar tropes of pirates and gentlemen, Stevenson manages to appropriate a beloved genre and use it to camouflage a deeper message.

Conversely, *Treasure Planet* takes the classic adventure basis of the book and turns it into a sci-fi piece. For the most part, the narrative structure remains very close to the novel, dealing with a young Jim Hawkins that sees his search for treasure and self, raided by evil pirates. Disguised by the appeal of the coming-of-age story and the compelling steampunk aesthetic, on a subtler note, similarly to the novel, the movie addresses social problems of its time. Still, though it deals with many of the same complex matters, by finishing the narrative with a happy ending, the movie ends up conveying a brighter, more positive message, presenting the viewer with a rather utopian look upon the problems it addresses.

Although the novel does not appear to have any direct correlation with steampunk, it does share many of its basic tropes, even if not immediately recognizable. While it is true that the novel does not focus on technological advancements whatsoever, it is directed at young people, much like any animation movie would be, and it deals with key steampunk themes, namely, the conflict with the Other, and the corruption of the self. Hence, what makes for an interesting analysis is to explore why and how *Treasure Planet* transforms the source text.

21st century America looking at 19th century Britain

As we are trying to understand how problems of the present can be explored in settings of the past, it becomes essential to point out some aspects of the society the movie is representing, as well as the connections with Victorian Britain, that will be at the basis of the adaptation. Being that *Treasure Planet* is an American adaptation of a British classic, we will have to consider not only the American social panorama but also the relationship between the two countries involved, and it is safe to say that this relationship is as complicated as the individual history of either nation. For we must not forget that the US started by being a British colony, a fact that is interesting to

explore considering that many of the most famous writers and editors of steampunk tend to be American rather than British:

> The relative reluctance of 21st century British men and women to reenact their nation's violent colonizing past is understandable, but it calls into question American steampunks' enthusiasm for affecting (often stereotypically) British personae, histories, and ritual. Whether critical or nostalgic, American steampunk unerringly reconfigures British history in order to enact it from the British perspective, taking for granted the so-called special transatlantic relationship in order to assume ties of cultural kinship and even identity. (Cochran 1)

As such, with the US being a relatively young country with its own violent history, shifting the focus of the narrative into Britain's dark past can be a strategy, not only to highlight Britain's colonial history but more importantly, to paint America in a preferable light by comparison. In this sense, the adventure genre and the steampunk aesthetics end up being an ideal way to divert attention from sensitive American problems while at the same time displaying the nation in all its glory.

Still on the matter of colonialism, it is important to keep in mind that in Victorian Britain the adventures of world exploration and crossing of new horizons were made by venturing into the untamed seas. At the time there were still unknown frontiers to be discovered on Earth and the power of the British Empire came from the ruling of the oceans. In parallel, the American territory was settled by conquering and pushing the western frontier, which presented many of the same issues as the expansion of the British Empire by sea. Meanwhile, in contemporary America, having the whole world been discovered and the western frontier disappeared, the new frontier became space. There was no longer a race for Africa or a dispute over the American territory, but there was a race to the moon. Thus, the matter of space exploration became a crucial trait of the nation that first sent a man to the moon. Hence why a Victorian setting resonates with the American people, and as such, it is not uncommon that fiction of the late 20th and early 21st centuries recreates maritime adventure scenarios in outer space.

Another matter worth mentioning is that, at the beginning of the 21st century, America was a victim of a massive terrorist attack that would come to change the world.

9/11 was the first attack the United States sustained in its own territory;[4] it was a trauma that shook the nation to its very core. Besides the loss of thousands of lives, the overwhelming distress that was to follow, and the economic decline, the attack led to President Bush's call for a global War on Terror. The political tension that emerged between the US and Iraq culminated in the Iraq war of 2003, an event that would not only lead many people to join the army but also greatly influence how the American military was seen by the general public (an issue that is vaguely addressed in the movie). The aftermath of the attack heavily influenced every aspect of American life, the production of fiction being no exception.

Steampunk and Animation

In order to understand the changes that occur in the adaptation and what can be inferred from them, we should first start by exploring the implications and possibilities provided by the animation format and the steampunk aesthetics. For that purpose, we will now look at some characteristics that help to define the nature of the movie, starting with the animation techniques that make a piece so different in style and tropes so close to the source text. An important thing to consider is that "while designing for *Treasure Planet*, the crew operated on a rule they call the *70/30 Law* (an idea that art director Andy Gaskill has credited to Ron Clements), which meant that the overall look of the movie's artwork should be 70% traditional and 30% sci-fi." ("Treasure Planet" n.pg.) This contributed to the very particular aesthetic that was achieved, which despite relying heavily on technological elements also focused on capturing the allure of tradition. But more than that, the movie also incorporated what were, at the time, innovative techniques in terms of the animation production process itself.

Another essential technique, which becomes very interesting in this context, is Hybrid Animation, "the combination of two-dimensional (2D) and three-dimensional (3D) animation media." (O'Hailey 5) The mixing of the two mediums can mean that different characters can be rendered in one medium or the other, or both at the same time, as is the case of John Silver: while the arm, eyepiece, and peg leg are 3D, the rest of the character's body is 2D. (O'Hailey 94) This technique contributes not only to assert the style but also adds narrative depth, for instance, reflective of his ambiguous

[4] Here the Pearl Harbor attack is not being considered as it was not an attack on continental America, but rather on Hawaii, an island state.

personality and name, Silver's character design accentuates his grey nature. Such a feature is accomplished not only by taking his famous peg leg and turning him into a cyborg but also by animating the two parts (man and machine) in different mediums. Moreover, the fact that, for the animation of the cyborg's movements, the 3D elements – the mechanical ones – follow the lead of the 2D – the human – (O'Hailey 94) can also be an interesting point for the analysis of the man/machine relationship.

On the other hand, in alignment with the steampunk motifs, we can focus attention on the lack of a defined space and time; we know the characters live in a planet called Montressor, but the rest of the environment is a mystery as there is no clear sense of time or space. Furthermore, the fact that the directors chose to present an outer space with an atmosphere, allowing for literal ships to roam space, only adds to the difficulty of placing the action. Most of these choices, namely that of setting the movie in outer space, according to writer Rob Edwards, were made in order to "make the story as exciting for kids now as the book was for kids then." ("Treasure Planet" n.pg.) It is also through the space setting that many of the technological elements characteristic of steampunk are made possible: ships become space ships, steam power becomes solar energy, the island becomes not only a planet, but a giant mechanical one, and the map is a gadget. In this way, the intriguing elements which recreated in their original form would have been too common are transformed by the steampunk aesthetic to capture the attention of a new, modern audience.

What makes all these elements even more interesting is their relevance within the story. For instance, the map is a gadget that must be unlocked through a specific pattern, once that happens, it projects a hologram of the galaxy along with coordinates and directions to Treasure Planet. Not only that, but it also functions as a key that, when inserted into the correct slot of the mechanical planet, has the function of opening portals into other dimensions. These are elements that stand as technological marvels and surprise and mesmerize the characters. However, other technologic elements that can be impressive to the viewer are portrayed as just a regular part of life; namely, Jim's solar surfboard, space ships with solar sails, and holograms instead of photographs or book illustrations.[5] Therefore, when considering the ways in which these elements are

[5] These technological and futuristic elements being presented as a regular part of life remind us of other classic sci-fi movies, such as *Back to the Future Part II*, that envision a future where such gadgets (like the famous hoverboards) are the norm, setting the bar for what the audience should expect their own future to look like.

depicted and what their function is within the story, we can see that by recreating a work of the past and designing it in a futuristic manner, *Treasure Planet*'s characteristic animation and distinctive style become extremely important in what concerns the possibility of interpreting contemporary ideologies.

Jim and Silver: Heroes and Pirates of the New World

The matter of imperialism, explored mainly through Jim and Silver's characters, is a central one in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island.* This is a subject that does not disappear in the adaptation, in fact, the idea that "there are much worse remedies than a few character-building months in space," ("Treasure Planet Script" 11) perfectly parallels the Victorian overseas tradition of adventure in which "heroism was enhanced by both distance and exotic locales." (MacKenzie 6) The ultimate goal of these so-called adventures would be to construct the *Imperial man*, defined by John Beynon as

> a patriotic servant of Queen, country, and Empire, the attributes of whom were adventurousness and fearlessness, stoicism, emotional reticence and coolness under pressure, a strong sense of fair play and justice, physical fitness and the capacity to take the lead as the occasion demanded. (162)

All attributes that *Treasure Planet*'s Jim embodies perfectly. Moreover, the patriotic and imperialist militarism that was fueled by British schools as the army rose in the public's esteem and became a source of local and civil pride (MacKenzie 5) can also be seen at the end of the movie.

After Jim proves himself worthy, by displaying all the qualities of the Imperial man and saving the crew, Captain Amelia is more than eager "to recommend you [Jim] to the interstellar academy. They could use a man like you." ("Treasure Planet Script" 50) Jim's happy ending, then, comes to pass when he graduates from the academy, a young cadet, a grown man, accepted and even revered by society. In Victorian Britain, "the growth of popular imperialism linked fantasies of heroic masculinity with representations of British national identity" (Ramos, "New Imperialism" 90); said visions of heroism linked with patriotism are also quite common in America, and this movie is no different. While Stevenson's goal was to deconstruct this unattainable ideal (hence why *Treasure Island'*s Jim does not manage to become an Imperial man) and criticize the activities of the Empire, directors Clements and Musker's goal would be to propagate the ideal of heroism realized in service of the nation.

Even though these Victorian ideals of masculinity and honor are materialized in Jim's character, there is another essential side to him, the rebel, the punk. Characteristic of the steampunk genre, Jim embodies some qualities of its most recognizable tropes besides the adventurous spirit; he is also a very gifted child, a sort of inventor (he knows how to work the map, builds his own surfboards since the age of 8, masters new skills with ease, quickly learns how to fly the longboats, etc.). Further, and more in line with the steampunk subculture, he is also portrayed as troubled youth of sorts. For most of the movie he is shown rebelling against the mainstream culture and society around him, he wants to be different, he wants the opportunity to discover and establish his identity free from others' expectations, making him a hero that the audience would easily relate to.

By portraying Jim in this way, the goal would be for the audience to not only root for him but also to follow and learn from him. By telling the story of a troubled youth that manages to find his way, the movie presents us with the model young Americans would be encouraged to follow so they too could find their brighter future. Since this is a cinematographic work, the paratextual elements become extremely relevant when constructing and presenting Jim's character. Some of the visual elements that help establish his rebelliously punk attitude include not only facial expressions and body language but also his clothes and his style. For the creation of Jim's style, "John Ripa cited James Dean as an important reference because 'there was a whole attitude, a posture' wherein 'you felt the pain and the youthful innocence.'" ("Treasure Planet" n.pg.) Even though his style is well established, it undergoes some alterations that serve as a way to mark his evolution. In the beginning, he uses darker clothes (black boots and jacket), an earring, and a ponytail. But, as the narrative progresses, he starts wearing lighter colors until his last appearance in a white uniform with no earring and his hair cut, symbolic of letting go of his childish revolt and assuming a more respectable role. Nevertheless, his boots remain black, which can be a representation of him establishing his nonconformism as a part of his newfound identity.

For the purposes of his evolution, a lot can be inferred from the songs that accompany his journey as well. Jim's wishes of achieving manhood and establishing his identity on his own terms are made clear in the song "I'm still here." His feelings of revolt towards the world that surrounds him are made clear in verses such as these: "I won't listen anyway / you don't know me, / And I'll never be what you want me to

be"; "and what do you think you'd understand / I'm a boy no, I'm a man / You can't take me and throw me away." (*Johnny Rzeznik* n.pg.) However, since the song accompanies a key-moment in his evolution, he also starts to show some signs of needing guidance and a desire to belong: "And I wanna tell you who I am / Can you help me be a man? / They can't break me / As long as I know who I am." (*Johnny Rzeznik* n.pg.) Showing this rebellious protagonist overcoming his difficulties on his own terms would hopefully inspire the audience to do the same.

It is also in this scene that we learn that Jim's father was a soldier that, after spending most of Jim's childhood away, ended up abandoning him and his mother. It is in this camouflaged way, through a few shots in a montage, that the movie alludes to the issue of children being left without a parent due to the activities of the army, showing one of the negative aspects of military service. Contrary to the book where Jim's father simply died, this shift is how the movie chooses to introduce the lack of a father or father figure as one of the aspects standing between Jim and manhood. The person that eventually ends up filling this role by mentoring Jim is none other than John Silver which causes more problems than it solves, "for Silver is the leader of the pirates and ostensibly the villain of *Treasure Island*, but he consistently looks after Jim Hawkins, and they become, in a wonderful stroke of irony, like father and son." (Butts 330) The relationship between the two characters is, therefore, central in both works; however, it is more explored in the movie.[6] Since Silver is presented as a morally grey character, assuming the role of the villain in many occasions, the father-son relationship with Jim is also going to be an ambiguous one,[7] ranging from healthy to problematic throughout the movie.

Moreover, much like what happens in the novel, Silver's character becomes a symbol of the threats of the world. For Victorian Britain it was a threat to the Empire and the integrity of the British gentleman; for 21st century America, it is the technological revolutions of the Digital Era. In *Treasure Planet*, more than being a pirate, Silver is a cyborg, half-man, half-machine. This difference still allows us to explore issues such as the capability of man for good and evil while adding another

[6] The fact that this relationship becomes more prominent in the movie aligns with a neo-Victorian trend to question and replace outdated images of a typical family model composed by mother father and child/children; focusing instead on the idea of found family.

[7] It is through this ambiguity that the movie is able to express that while it is important for the hero to ask for and accept help, even if it comes from unexpected role models, it is also possible to outgrow those mentors and follow his own path.

layer of meaning, representing goodness through the human and evil through the machine. Furthermore, in moments when man and machine are being pitted against each other, more than establishing a relationship of good vs. evil, what is being established is a relationship of power that emphasizes the need for human control.[8] This becomes evident when Silver has to choose between saving the treasure and saving Jim's life; he is holding on to the treasure with his cyborg's arm but ends up letting go and saving Jim, with his human hand, making clear he chose his *human side, his good* side. The relationship between men and machines becomes then a prominent (if not too idealistic) subject in the movie.

Other Representations

The different threats the movie deals with are presented not only by Silver, since all pirates are portrayed monstrously, which highlights the threat of degeneration much like in the novel, and it reminds us of how inferior races and 'freaks' were portrayed in works of the Victorian Era. On the other hand, we also have entirely mechanical beings, like the police officers at the beginning, as well as the castaway, who in the movie is replaced by a malfunctioning automaton, B.E.N. "I'm B.E.N. Bioelectronic Navigator." ("Treasure Planet Script" 35) Interestingly enough, B.E.N., being 100% mechanical, is animated entirely in a 3D medium; he is also another technological invention that cannot work properly until Jim fixes him, reinforcing the idea that in the war between man and machine, man is always superior. Even though some of the mechanical beings are portrayed as *good* characters (perhaps to reinforce the *good* possibilities of technology), they remain inferior, proving that threats of otherness are as real in the 21st century as they were in the 19th.

Last but not least, a crucial modification that is due to the changing times is the introduction of female characters. As Peter Hunt mentions in his introduction to *Treasure Island*, in Victorian works, the hero usually has a mother of whom he can think fondly – otherwise, female characters are rare (xxi). To counter this tendency, in the movie, Jim's mother, Sarah, is a much more present figure than in the book. She is presented as a complex character, a strong woman, a single mother, and a (struggling)

[8] In this sense, the matters of colonization that can be studied in the novel regarding the degenerate pirates and the gentlemen can also be observed in the movie by looking at the portrayals of machines and the influence they can have over men.

business owner. We understand that she has a strong but slightly complicated relationship with Jim but still has a significant part in shaping him. The other female with a relevant role in the story is Captain Amelia. Not only does she take up a function that is male-dominated and symbolic of masculinity, but she does so while maintaining a feminine figure and displaying a strong personality with traces associated with manliness. She also commands respect from the beginning, her femininity standing as no impediment. In a world where women's place in society is still far from ideal, the addition of these characters shows an improvement in comparison to the past. However, the fact that the addition of only two named female characters constitutes a milestone allows us to consider the problem of the representation of the women in fiction in the past as well as in the present, raising questions such as: is it enough? What can this mean for the future of fiction? Will we be satisfied with this symbolic addition and leave it at that, or will it be a starting point for greater change?

Final Remarks

Taking into account what has been said, it is safe to assume that the source text appealed to the creators because the plot, setting, characters, and themes could all be relevant in a contemporary context. The core of the story remains the same, while the changes that occur are directly affected by the contemporary society that is making those same changes. The movie manages to explore themes similar to those of the novel (that remain relevant to this day) in a more familiar setting, as to attract attention, but not so familiar that they become too mundane and therefore unappealing (this is achieved by turning it into a futuristic sci-fi movie). The time and setting relocation also allow for many current issues to be camouflaged as problems of the past; however, it is the different ways in which similar problems are addressed that show us how notions of the past, present, and future also differ. While *Treasure Island* stands as a warning against the dangers of imperialist actions, *Treasure Planet* actively ignores warnings of the past by showing the present in an exceeding positive light, reinforcing unattainable notions of grandeur, and, therefore, ending up projecting a utopian vision of a hypothetical future.

In this sense, the fact that America was only then starting to recover from a massive terrorist attack might have influenced the decision to opt for a happy ending, since the audiences would not want to face matters of corruption and destruction but

rather a positive message of encouragement. While "Stevenson's work demonstrated how the traditional structure of the adventure story could be a magnificent instrument for raising serious issues," (Butts 330) *Treasure Planet* shows us how sci-fi (via steampunk) stands as a genre equally capable of addressing the same serious issues. However, we can also see how the sci-fi format gives way for idealized versions of the present and future to come to light. Thus, it is in this way that this movie takes a work from the past, redesigns the setting in a futuristic style, and rewrites the plot in light of the present while also setting a hopeful message for the future.

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REVIEW

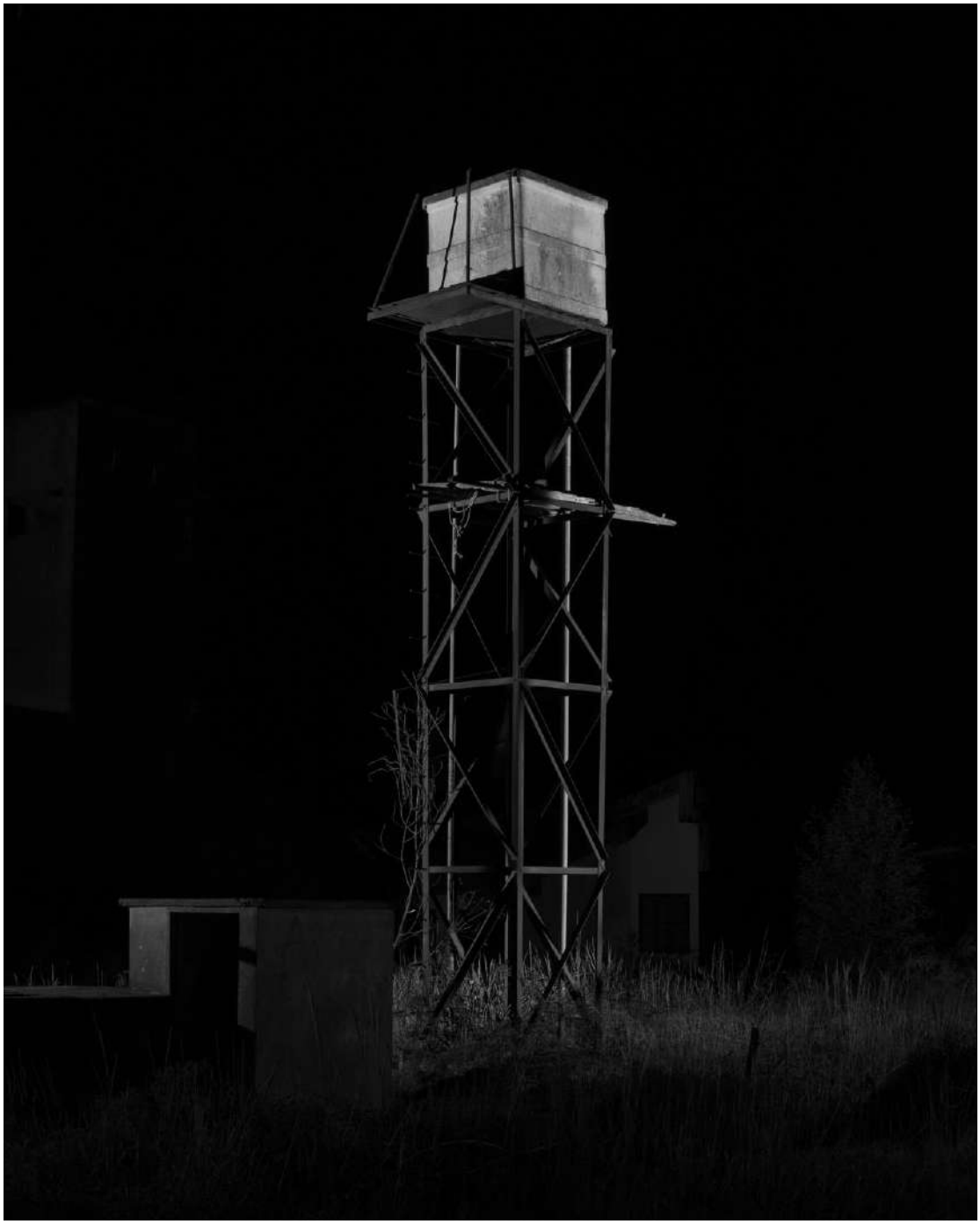

Photo: Duarte Amaral Netto

Palestine+100: Stories from a Century after the Nakba (2019)

Farah AlYaqout

"Dystopian writing is diasporic writing," writes Basma Ghalayini in her introduction to *Palestine+100* (2019). That statement is accurate and prescient,

especially when it comes to a Palestinian short story collection. The inability to cross their country's borders or reunite with family members from different countries is a real and pressing issue in Palestine. The mere fact that diasporic writing exists—that the world has been so torn by war and conflict that we have invented a genre for authors who are unable to return to their native land country—is in its very essence dystopian. The fact that Palestinians live within a diaspora of their own country, unable to visit different parts of Palestine without special license, a fact which is exaggerated in the Ahmad Massoud's story "Application 39", is proof that writing from within a diaspora means writing about a lived dystopian reality.

Palestine+100: Stories from a Century after the Nakba is touted as the first-ever collection of Palestinian science fiction, as well as the winner of the 2018 PEN Translates Award. The short story collection speculates on what Palestine will look like in the future, a hundred years after the 1948 Nakba (meaning "catastrophe", in Arabic). It is the second in CommaPress' publications that delves into speculative fiction of the Arab world which is set around a seminal date that changed the country's history. Already in 2016, CommaPress published *Iraq+100,* with ten short stories set in 2103, exploring Iraq's future a hundred years after the invasion by the United States, in 2003.

Most of the stories in *Palestine+100* take place in the not-too-distant future of 2048, using Palestinians' contemporary reality to inform their predications of the future. Most of its authors reside in the diaspora although all the stories are set in Palestine. The authors who contributed to *Palestine+100* write across different languages, from different countries, and across different ages, bringing forth a varied and eclectic collection of predictions concerning Palestine's future. Rarely are the author's predications optimistic, but they are never outright hopeless.

Ghalayani writes that Palestinians literature is, "in part, a search for their lost inheritance, as well as an attempt to keep the memory of that loss from fading". The twelve stories in *Palestine+100* share many of these common themes. In the introduction, Ghalayini guides the reader to ideas that are recurrent in Palestinian literature: Palestinians' belief in their "right to return", as symbolized by the drawing of a key on the collection's cover; the suffocating or empowering effect of memory on the collective Palestinian memory; the use of technology to control the Palestinian population; as well as a general sense of absence and isolation from themselves and the rest of the world.

That feeling of isolation is especially visible in what may be considered the strongest story in the anthology. Saleem Haddad's "Song of the Birds" is the first story in the collection, and it has also been included in SagaPress' *The Year's Best Science Fiction, Vol. 1* (2020). In "Song of the Birds" a young Aya receives her first menstrual blood, and her crossing the liminal border into womanhood, triggers a realization in her that the world they live in is a false, virtual reality. This realization is aided by her dead brother Ziad who claims to have exited this false reality and is pushing Aya to join him in the 'real world'.

In almost all the stories in this collection, virtual reality exists, in one form or another, to trick the Palestinians into accepting their reality. Ghalayani writes, "In all cases, the future's technology, though designed to ease conflict or ameliorate trauma, manages only to exacerbate it". In Haddad's story, the author incorporates the use of sleep as a numbing agent, an escape from the limitations of the imposed virtual reality. It is only when one crosses a liminal border of their own that they begin to see the 'song of the birds' for what it truly is.

Many of the stories revolve around a lack of trust in technology and the authority figures who wield them. "Song of the Birds" is not the only story in the collection which uses the concept of video games and virtual reality to emphasize a fear that Palestinians' lived "reality" is not true. There is a thread of anxiety running through all of the short stories that feature a resolution to the Palestinian conflict: an anxiety and fear that this peace is not true, that it is a dream they are being placated with. Ghalayani writes that "this 'ongoing Nakba' is continually evolving" and the short stories of *Palestine+100* have evolved the methods in which they may be controlled.

Palestine+100 shows the reality of living in a country that has been constantly plagued by war and bombings: for example, many stories mention or explicitly deal with the question of prosthetics and disabilities. While war and technology have evolved, so, too, has medicine and medical advancements. Tasnim Abutabikh's "Vengeance" revolves around two Palestinians with perceived slights against each other, going back to the Nakba in 1948. The centuries' long hatred finally results in the loss of one of the best creators of artificial limbs and life-saving masks in Palestine, depriving the neighborhood of a valuable asset. Selma Dabbagh's "Sleep It Off, Dr. Schott" also includes the character of Professor Kamal, whose life mission is the creation of 3D printing limbs. The characters in both stories are cut down by the

ambition and selfish actions of an outside observer—such loss of Palestinian intelligence, kindness, and humanity at the hands of other Palestinians exists time and time again in *Palestine+100*, denying their progress and the resolution to their problems from within.

Majd Kayyal's "N" features a producer of virtual realities who works in Israel, and can cross between Palestine and Israel, while his father cannot. The father calls virtual reality the "complete abandonment of memory" and returns to that idea again—how virtual reality can be an escape, but it also causes them to "[live] in a trauma they can't overcome". In Emad El-Din Aysha's "Digital Nation", a Palestinian world is created and leaked to the world, inviting them to explore Palestine, its language, music, as well as its cultural figures and heroes. In "Digital Nation", Palestinians infiltrate an Israeli security network and force their way onto the world, digitally, introduce the world to their language, their culture and their food, as the only way of ensuring the longevity of their culture. Abdalmuti Maqboul's "Personal Hero" is about exploring and introducing the world to its Palestinian cultural figures and heroes – in this case, Abd Al-Qadir al-Husayni – in the form of virtual landscapes. In Maqboul's short story, the "Personal Hero" is the main character's grandfather, a martyr who she never got to meet, and who she wishes to introduce to the world. The incentive for Palestinians' technological progress and inventions is to combat their death, the destruction of their land, and being forgotten by the rest of the world.

In another story, for instance, the existence of parallel universes is explored. In "N", Majd Kayyal writes about how travel is now weaponized: Palestinian children are born with the ability to travel between two worlds, while their parents cannot join them in Israel, where better educational and job opportunities lie. "N" shows how borders mean more than just where one lives: they signify where one has opportunity, where a future is possible, as well as showing that there are many who are denied these opportunities. In Talal Abu Shawish's "Final Warning", aliens fly down to Palestine and Israel, issuing a final warning to the residents of the two countries and redrawing the borders to what they believe is the "correct" order. Topics like alien invasions and parallel worlds feature more "typical" themes in science fiction in order to make a statement about the dystopia of borders and restriction of travel between members of different countries. Ghalayani writes that "the act of reframing the present in the form of allegories (and not just future-set ones) may become more of a necessity than a

luxury". Not only is it a way of bypassing any censorship which still exists in the Arab world, but also as a way of avoiding any criticism of Israel being perceived as anti-Semitism.

In a Gothic horror short story that adopts a veiled symbol, Anwar Hamed's "The Key" metaphorizes the anxiety felt by Israelis about Palestinians' belief in their right to return to their homes. As Ghalayini relays in her introduction, Palestinian stories and family histories are filled with the haunting memories of keys carried by exiled parents and grandparents, thousands of keys that open the doors of houses that no longer belong to them. Hamed's story is the first which shows us the perspective of Israeli characters and how they have psychologically deal with that knowledge. In Hamed's telling, the Israelis are haunted by their subconscious, in a visceral way that affects the youngest Israelis first, until everyone in the country is terrified of the sounds of keys trying open locked doors.

Palestine+100: Stories from a Century after the Nakba is a strong, well-written collection of Palestinian science fiction—the first of its kind. It places the imagining of a Palestinian future in the hands of its citizens and the results are varied. The short stories feature pessimism, disappointment, and very cautious hope in what the future might hold.

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FICTION

I Will Tell You Seven

Mike Carey

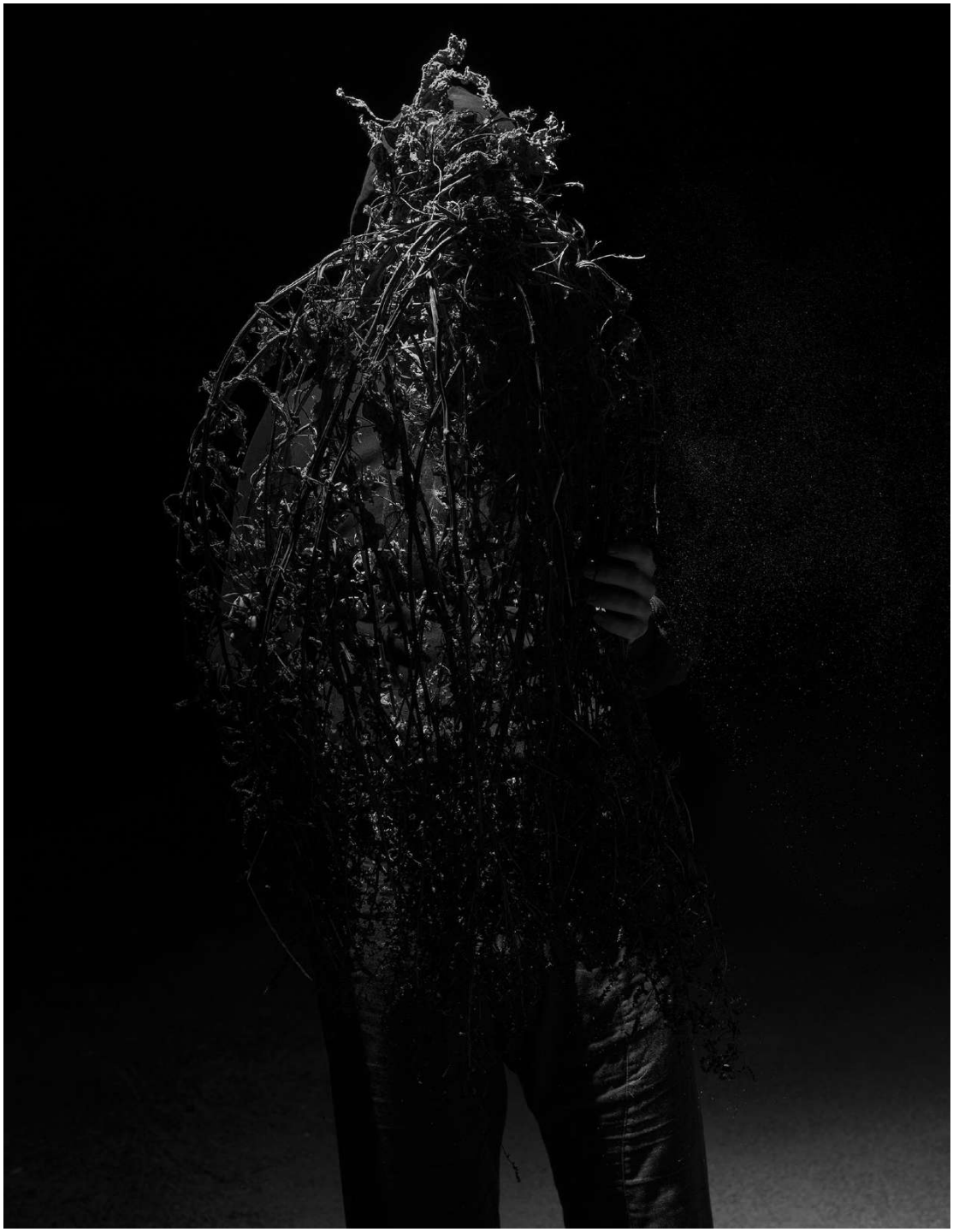


Photo: Duarte Amaral Netto

It was a dark and stormy night. The moon was up there somewhere, full and round like a silver shilling, but it couldn't be seen through all the ragged rifts of cloud that glided down the great sky river towards a still-distant dawn.

All these things had to be true, by the way. None of it was accidental, or unlooked-for. If it hadn't been dark, Unsung Jill would have been blind. If it hadn't been wet, Peter couldn't have come up out of the lake. If there had been no moon, Kel would have had no claws and Anna could not have danced.

We would none of us have been ready for the great fight that was to come.

Let us say, for the sake of argument, that we were seven. Seven would have been a goodly number, after all. Seven small figures (for Kel was not in his furry coat yet, and Unsung Jill can be any size she wishes) running up the hill toward the castle wall.

Toward Errencester, where twice times one hundred men at arms waited for us. And one mage. And one monster.

I'm lying, though. There were only six that came to the castle that night, and six were not enough.

It seems I've no more wit for tales than I have for tallies. We must go back a little, to get the sense of this. Then we'll push on.

"…and come to our village?" Dam Alice said. "And help us? Fight for us?"

"What, now?" I muttered. I was only halfway through my supper, and tired from a long day's hunting. I hadn't been listening properly to what the two men and the one woman had been saying to me. I didn't know why they were here, standing at the mouth of my hole in the queasy twilight that was neither one thing nor another. Out of the three, it was only the woman I recognised, as a friend of my mother's in times long gone. They bothered me somewhat, but not enough to make me want to kill them and eat them.

"We asked if you would come," the big man said. Tall. Tall man. Not big like Kel is big, for he had little heft to him. His body was gaunt, and his skin pocked with old sores. His silver hair was sparse. "We're in desperate need."

"Are you, then?" I said, and bit into the bird again. It was a moorhen, I think. I had plucked out most of the feathers, but left the bones in to give it some crunch. I chewed the spiky mouthful hard. I don't really taste things any more, but the jagged

ends of the bones stuck into my cheeks and the roof of my mouth, which was almost the same as eating something with spice to it. The wounds healed over as soon as they were made. I don't ever hurt for long.

"The new lord has done terrible things to us," the other man said. He was small, even shorter than the woman, and very wide in the body. His limbs were short and his head was large. His red hair and beard were so full it looked like someone had set his head on fire. There's a name for the kind of man he was, but I don't remember it. "He takes everything we've got, and anyone who protests is cut down by his soldiers."

"The old lord rode us hard," Dam Alice declared, "but he was careful not to kill the chicken because he wanted to keep having eggs to eat. Ebberlin is different. He's married a lady from across the water, a magician's get, and she brought him a dower of spell-found gold richer than dreams. He doesn't need us any more. And I think he means to end us."

"What's that to me?" I asked. And then, because it seemed like a question they were better able to answer, "What can you offer me?"

"A home," the big man said. "You left Cosham because you didn't feel welcome there."

"True, yes. Very true. Pitchforks were stuck in me. Mattocks were swung at my head. Was I wrong, pock-marked man? Was I welcome after all?"

His blotched skin grew flushed. He looked away.

"We treated you badly," Dam Alice said. "We're very sorry. But you can come back now, as Bertram said. And anyone else you bring to help us, they'll be welcome too. Cosham will open its doors, and its granaries. You'll be fed. Sheltered."

"Loved," the short man said. Dwarf. The dwarf. That is the word I was looking for.

"Loved," Dam Alice agreed.

"Interesting," I said. "You want me to find others, then? Other champions to fight for you?"

"Well," the big man said. "You can't lay siege to a castle all by yourself." He laughed, a little nervously.

I thought about that. As I was thinking, I ate what was left of the dead bird, gulping it down my throat in one go. It took a long time to go down. When I was first alive, I would have choked to death before I swallowed it all. I'm stronger now, though,

and while breathing is a comfort to me sometimes, it doesn't feel as important as it used to.

"No," I said. "You're right. I can't do that alone. There'll need to be more of us."

"Then you'll help!" Dam Alice brought her hands together and squeezed them tight, her face twisted and crumpled by a hope so unexpected it came close to pain.

"I think I remember Ebberlin, when he was a boy," I said. "He killed Garian's dog with an arrow, and laughed about it."

The dwarf looked uncertain. "Aren't *you* Garian?" he asked me.

That's a mistake a lot of people make. I shook my head. "I'm what Garian became after he lay in the ground for a year. Let me think on it. I don't like Ebberlin much, and I did like living in a house. Perhaps I'll help you."

The big man drew himself up, and looked at the other two each in turn, as if to say he spoke for all of them. "We need more than a perhaps," he said.

"But that's what you're getting," I told him.

They went away, then. I saw that the dwarf was lame.

I went to the river, and called out to Peter.

"Ho, hey, harum," I called. "Boy of rainfall, boy of tears. River's son and flood's favourite, come at my beseeching."

Who needs to cross these waters? Peter answered. He had not yet shown himself.

"Nobody yet," I said. "It's me, that used to be Garian. I came to talk, is what."

The water of the lake rose up in a great spume, that shaped itself into a boy. He skimmed across the surface the way a ripple does, breaking apart and coming together ever and again, until he stood before me.

Ho, Once-Was-Garian, and hey, he said. *What is it you'd talk about?*

"An offer was put to me," I said, and I told him what it was.

Well, Peter said, *whelming Errencester is a fine idea. I hate them all, in that castle, because of what they did to Magrete in the time when I was alive. But your siege will fail. Those gates won't open to you, and Uther's walls can't be made to fall.*

"It's not Uther any more, it's Ebberlin. And as for the walls, I have a plan. Will you come with me, and help me?"

I cannot. I stand in the torrent and take its toll. I can't come on dry land again.

"I know it. How if the land were not dry, though?"

What?

"How if there was a great storm, with sheets of rain coming down? Could you not run from drop to drop to drop, and so come out of the water and onto the earth without taking hurt?"

Peter was silent for a long while. He let himself fall back into the spate, and came back a moment later in a new shape, thinner and taller. *I have no idea if that would work,* he said.

"Would you like to try?"

With all my heart, if it means vengeance on Uther's kin. But will we go together?

"That's my plan."

And breach the keep that never yet was broken?

"Even so."

But… must we wait for a storm, then? There are not many in the dead Winter.

"Leave that to me. I know a way to bring one."

Morjune was twelve years old when she was taken as a witch and burned.

It was all done very properly, and according to the law. The villagers of Cosham put her in Fra Nuggle's barn, tied to a metal stake that they had hammered into the floor there. They waited for the circuit magistrate to come through, and set her before him, charging that she had blighted Fra Nuggle's crops and caused his wife to deliver a welter of blood instead of a live baby.

The evidence was strong. Did Morjune not live alone in her dead mother's house? And had she not missed going to church three Sundays out of every month? And did she not mutter to herself when she walked, as if she were talking to a devil nobody else could see?

The circuit magistrate, a man who had learned his law in far-off Oxford, put Morjune to very thorough question. After her thumbs and fingers were crushed with a screw and half her teeth were drawn out with a pliers, the girl admitted that she was indeed a witch and had done all the things that were alleged against her.

She was burned in the village square, and since it was a market day a good crowd came to watch her die.

Her coming back was a great deal quieter. Nobody realised she was there at all until Dam Alice noticed there was a lamp burning in old Mother Jessop's house, which with Morjune's death should by rights be empty. After she reported this three nights in a row, some men went to the house to see for themselves what was what.

There was no lamp. Morjune was there, and she was still on fire. It was not a blameful fire, though. It ran across the floor of the old house, and climbed the walls, and licked at the table and chairs, but none of those things were consumed. Morjune sat in the kitchen corner, with her knees drawn up to her chest, and offered no harm to anyone.

The village priest, Father Hasting, exorcised her with prayers and holy water, but she only came back. He tried again, with bell and book and candle, to no better effect. After that, the villagers left Morjune alone and she did them the same courtesy. She wanted no further argument with them.

She wanted none with me, either, and wouldn't come out at first when I went to her house and sat down at her table. After a while, though, when I didn't speak or move, she toppled a pot off the kitchen stove, and then a trencher off the bench, and then a chair.

"Go away," she whispered. Her voice was like the skittering of small beasts in dry leaves.

"I will, soon," I said. "Morjune, the people of the village have asked me to whelm the castle of Errencester and kill Duke Ebberlin. They say they'll give me, and everyone that goes with me, a home and a welcome thereafter."

"I've already got a home. I live here."

"But nobody speaks to you. Nobody comes."

"That's how I like it."

"God give you grace, then. If you're never lonely, and never bored, they've nothing to give you and nor have I."

We were both of us quiet a while after that. "What would you want me for?" Morjune asked at last. "I'm only a ghost. And my fire's only a memory of fire. It doesn't burn."

"I don't want you for that, but for another trick entirely."

"I'm not a witch, revenant boy. I never was. I only said that so they'd stop hurting me."

“I know how torture works, Morjune.”

“So did they. What trick would you have me do?”

I told her what was in my mind. The flames came creeping around me as I talked, and climbed the legs of the table, and danced upon its top. When I left, the whole house was burning, the fire roaring like a wild animal as it leapt from floor to beams to thatch and up into the sky as if it were going home to the sun, the fount of all fires.

Just as it did every night, to no end or avail.

The villagers sent the dwarf to tell me that they were not happy with me. His name, I learned, was Thomas. That had been my mother’s father’s name.

“It’s the witch,” he said. “Morjune.” He threw out his arms in a kind of shrug, as if he were casting the words on the ground between us, showing at the same time his empty hands. Showing how far he was from intending harm. “Master Bertram and Dam Alice never meant for you to consort with fiends and damned souls.”

I was sitting on the parapet of the village well, talking with Peter who was down in the water below me. I had gone first to my mother and father’s house, but my father’s brother, Benjemin, was living there now with his children, and they all screamed at the sight of me.

Did they not know me? had they not heard the story? Apparently not.

“Damned souls,” I said. “Is that what she is?”

“She was condemned for black magic. You can’t do such things and go to Heaven.”

“She didn’t go to Heaven, though, did she? Or to Hell, either. She stayed here, in Cosham. I think we can agree that’s in between.”

Thomas frowned, and scratched his elbow. He looked to be working through my words to see if there was any chink or hole in them. “It may be that Master Bertram and Dam Alice are right,” I said, “and angels will get the job done faster. Tell them to send me some. Until then, I’ll work with what I’ve got.”

Unsung Jill should have been the easiest of all to recruit. A corpse-candle is best to summon her with, but an ordinary tallow candle will do, and being a bogyar she delights in mischief for its own sake. But when I called her name and pinched the wick to put out the light, she didn’t come. I was alone in the dark.

I'll try again later, I thought, and went to talk with Kel and Anna in the Crowfell woods. We were friends of a long time, and comfortable with one another. I found them feeding on a deer they'd brought down together. They invited me to share the meal, but I thanked them kindly and said no. Kel's appetite is huge, when he's hairy, and a deer splits two ways more easily than three.

When they had eaten their fill, I told them about the plan to whelm Errencester. They were delighted, and said they would be pleased to come along and help so long as the moon was full. "What about Magrete, though?" Kel said.

"I have a plan for Magrete."

"I wouldn't wish to hurt her."

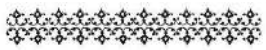
"No. Nor would I. My plan's not that."

"If we come to the keep and can't breach it, it will go hard with us."

"I warrant you, we'll crack the walls of Errencester as if Errencester were a new-laid egg."

They liked the sound of that, and renewed their promises. There had to be a full moon, which gave me two days yet to finish my preparations. In truth, I was all but done. The main thing now was to treat with Unsung Jill. Without her help I couldn't do anything. She was like the nail that made the horse throw its shoe in the old story, and caused the king to fall and the battle to be lost. She would bring the storm, and the storm would let Peter rise up out of the river. Or else she wouldn't, and there was nothing to be done after all.

I thought I could make her join with us, if only she would talk to me. So perhaps words were the nail.



Benjemin's oldest son, Arran, came looking for me. He found me in the broken barn behind my uncle's orchard, where I had gone because my being at the well made too many people afraid to come there and fill their buckets.

When he came to the door I stopped what I was doing, which was writing names on pieces of slate, and bid him enter.

"Are you my cousin?" he asked me. That question must have been turning in his mind ever since I came to the house. I could have said yes, or even no, but a lie told to a child is a weightier thing than one told to a grown man or woman. Children haven't

come to an understanding of the world, and they may build your lies into their believing in ways that will come to hurt them.

"Come here," I said. "Sit by me. Do you know your letters?"

"No. I can count up to ten, though." He sat beside me, though his eyes as he looked at me were big and troubled. It took courage. I smiled at him. Then I remembered what I look like when I smile, and stopped.

"Your cousin Garian died," I said. "Of a fever. His father, your uncle Hale, buried him in Viglund's Church, as he might have been expected to do. But when he and his wife, Sarah, went home, their grief did not abate. Instead it grew stronger and stronger. People who are sorrowing do foolish things, sometimes. My mother and father did something very stupid indeed. They went to Southfold. They found a wise man there, a sorcerer named Cain Caradoc, and asked him to bring their son back.

"The sorcerer knew two fools when he saw them. He said he could do it, but asked how they would pay him. They offered eight shillings, which was all they had, but though it was a fortune to them he told them it was not enough. I will bring your son back, he said, but I'll take a tithing of him for myself. You can have all of his body, and most of his soul. I'll just keep one small piece. I can use it in my magics."

Arran looked at me solemnly and fearfully. "What did they say?"

"They said yes. They'd walked all the way to Southfold, and screwed their hopes up higher with each mile they walked. To say no would have been more than they could bear. So the spell was made, and what came up out of the grave was me. So you see, your question is easier to ask than it is to answer. Some of me is, or was, some of your cousin. But I'm not him, and I don't answer to his name."

Arran cast his gaze on the ground, and on the pile of slates there. He touched the pile with his foot, and the slates slid sideways. Some of them fell and broke. The boy startled. "I'm sorry!" he said. "I didn't mean to."

"It's fine," I said. "I need them broken anyway."

"Were Uncle Hale and Aunt Sarah happy when you came home to them?"

"They were not. They were struck to the heart when they saw me, and withal they were ashamed and sickened by what they'd done. My father took me into the woods a long way and tried to lose me there, but I found my way back. Then he tried to kill me, but that proved impossible. My body doesn't remember hurts the way a living body does. It finds its way back to the same shape, ever and again.

“So in the end, they gathered a few things and left in the night. I woke to an empty house – the house you live in now. I searched for them a while. And I suppose I could have found them if I’d put my mind to it. But I looked in my heart, or where I thought my heart should be, and I found I didn’t care enough to chase after them. They’d made me out of love and thoughtlessness, which I suppose is how most people are made, and then they’d regretted the bargain. It happens every day.”

“But then the house was yours. You could have carried on living in Cosham.”

“Cosham didn’t want me.”

“But it does now?”

“Yes. It does now. Do you help me to break up these slates, now, and tell me some names to put on them.”

“What kind of names?”

“Men’s names. Any you can think of.”

He came up with several that I hadn’t thought of. Allan and Iain, Luke, Charles, Mark, Geoffrey… I wrote them all down, one by one, on the jagged shards of slate, while the dusk deepened around us, joining up the shadows in the barn.

Her presence came over me like a blanket, making the sounds of wind and birdsong and creaking wood sound dull and far away. “You’d best go home now,” I said to Arran. “It’s getting dark, and your mother will be looking for you.”

He stood, wiping dirt from the back of his breeks. “I’m sorry for what happened to you,” he said.

“It’s kind of you to say so. Thank you for visiting with me, cousin. And go well.”

He nodded and went scampering off, as fast as if he knew what was behind him.

“I didn’t speak your name,” I said to the dark.

“Yes,” Unsung Jill whispered. “You did, last night, and that calling still holds. I choose when I come, and where I come, and what I look like when I come. Will you turn, fragment of a boy, and look me in the eye?”

“I’d rather not,” I said. “I spent long enough in the ground. I don’t wish to be dragged back there by your green eye, Jill.”

“Look in the yellow one, then.”

“I like that even less. Is that why you’ve come? To trick me and tie me up?”

The whisper of her breath went across my neck. “No,” she said. And then, “I heard you talking, with the little one.”

“And?”

“And I remember.”

“What do you remember?”

“Something. It doesn’t really matter what. You’d like a storm?”

“Oh, I would, Jill. I really would. The biggest storm this land has ever seen.”

“And if I give you such a thing, incomplete child, what have you got to give me in return?”

“I can offer you what was offered to me. A home. A place to live.”

I felt that cold breath again, winding over me and through me. “You know where I live.”

“I know where you live now. Have you no longing for new things and places?”

Silence fell, and held for a long time. A very long time. I wanted to turn around, but couldn’t. If I looked her in the eye, the best that would come would be disaster. In the end she said “You’ll have your storm. Say my name again, and I’ll come to you. But look you be not foresworn, little piece of a mortal child. You cannot imagine what it means to break your word to me.”

A long time after, when I was sure she was gone, I set down the slate and the sliver of glass I was using to write on it. I covered my eyes with my hands, and thought of nothing. There was great warmth and comfort in nothing, right then.

They came into the barn, in the full light of noon. Perhaps they thought I would be weakest then.

“What is it you mean to do?” Dam Alice asked. Master Bertram and Thomas stood behind her. All three of them looked angry. All three of them looked afraid.

“Why, I mean to march on Errencester,” I told her.

“To march? You talk as if you’ve got an army. You’re no more than a handful!”

“But was ever such a handful scraped together, lady, since the world was made?”

She made an impatient gesture – a shrug of the head that tossed my words away. “You’ve leagued with things we can’t countenance. Cursed things.”

“Is it so? And who did the cursing, then?”

“We thought you might speak to the one that spelled you out of the ground. Borrow a hex from him. Black magic in a righteous cause is no sin. But this…”

I stood. It was not to frighten her, but to keep her from toppling the slates. I had not minded when the boy Arran had done it, because most of the pieces still had to be broken down into smaller pieces anyway. It would be inconvenient now to lose any of the ones I’d made. “We made a bargain,” I said. “It’s yet to play out. Go away now, and leave me be.”

“You’ve broken the bargain. You’re outside the spirit of it.”

“I think not. Go away.”

They went. I thought Thomas looked back at me as if he was sorry to be a part of this. I saw again how his left leg twisted, so his body sank down and rose up again with each step.

And oh, it was such a storm. Such a storm and such a dark! Jill did us proud.

We gathered at the river’s bank, near the Wythen ford, and waited. Anna was there, and Kel. “What’s in your bag?” Kel asked me.

“Slates. For throwing.”

“That’s well. What are we waiting for?”

We were waiting for Peter, but I didn’t need to answer, for just then he reared up out of the water right beside us. He stepped out onto the riverside weeds like Noah’s flood with a face and a name. *I like this much,* he said. *Thank you kindly, Garian.*

“Thank Jill,” I said. “She it was that squeezed the clouds, and wreaked this riot.”

Unsung Jill?

“Even her.”

Ah, then I like it less. For is she not of Hell?

“What’s Hell, but a warm hearth and a few good companions?” Jill whispered from behind him. A shudder went through Peter, like a wave goes through the clear ocean. He said no more.

“Well, then,” I said. “Let’s to it.”

“Have we no more strategy than that?” Anna asked.

“Our strategy is to force them off the walls and into the keep.”

“And then?”

“And then we’ll see.”

The river and the ford were at the bottom of a steep hill called Sheep Run, and Errencester castle stood at the top of it. As soon as we left the margin of the river we were likely to be seen, so there was little point in creeping and crawling. Instead we ran, out of the trees that had covered us and up the hill.

We were not fired on. From the battlements of Errencester, we must have looked like ragamuffins playing a game. That is, until Jill drew back her arm and let fling, with a fireball like a tiny sun. It took a man off the wall, so quickly that he didn't even scream as he fell.

These are just sell-swords, Peter said. *Their deaths serve no-one.*

"When you sell your sword to Ebberlin," said Kel, "you know full well who'll be on the other end of it. They get no mercy from me."

They got none from me, either. I flung my slates, one by one by one. Most of them only fell on the ground, and lay there, but the ones that bore a right name, a name of one of the bowmen and spearmen on the battlements, they went straight and true to that man's heart. One after another they fell.

The castle's defenders knew us for a threat, then, and answered us in kind. Their arrows fell like hail, hitting us hard. Jill and I were not troubled by them, so we went before and drew the soldiers' fire, Jill expanding to her full height to make herself an easier target. Kel and Anna ran in our shadows, and Peter walked apart. What quarrels and bolts hit him passed straight through and went on their way. And ever and anon, as we advanced, Jill spat out hate and heat and hurt in every shape and colour, opening gaps on the walls that did not fill again.

My bag being empty now, I flung it away. I was more than happy to lose the weight. Behind me, Kel changed and Anna began to dance. When the gates loomed in front of us, Jill and I stepped aside and let them pass.

Kel is a bear, when he changes. Anna is many things, and nothing. She remembers all the flesh she's ever tasted, and weaves and winds it together in ways that were never seen before. She towered over all of us, even her brother, and where he hit the gates in the middle she hit them high.

The gates went down. The soldiers who had been waiting behind them, to rush out on us, went down too, crushed by a handspan's thickness of old oak and a stampede of terrible shapes that was all one girl.

We were in the bailey yard now, and in greater danger than before. This space was made to be a killing ground, squeezed as it was between the outer walls and the keep. That was why we had harried the soldiers so hard, as we came. We hoped that they would fall back into the keep rather than hold their posts and fire straight down on us.

Some of them did, but some did not, and now there was no room for quarter. I ran up the walls, into the teeth of the falling arrows, and Peter ran beside me. The caked thicknesses of storm cloud above us made the narrow space between the walls as dark as night, but Jill's fireballs gave us a trail we could follow. We went among the defenders, and we heaped ruin on them. Seeing us come, a mad boy stuck full of arrows but not faltering and a boy of water whom arrows could not touch, they despaired and fled at last.

All had gone as I had hoped, so far, and I had one trick left for Duke Ebberlin and his thanes. I went ahead, not to kill the fleeing men but to make sure they kept on running until they reached the keep.

One of them did not. A great, slope-shouldered giant strode into my path, his back bent by the weight of a club so big and heavy it looked like an uprooted tree.

As he lifted it up, he raised his head too. I saw his face.

It was a child's face. And it was weeping.

Morjune had come into Errencester from under the ground, following the ancient stream that fed its well. Peter could have done this too, if we hadn't needed him for the attack – but he couldn't have gone where Morjune went next.

Only a ghost could slide between the stones of the keep, and even a ghost could feel the force that lived there, pushing back at her. Morjune shut her eyes and struggled on, blindly, like a traveller lost in a gale. But there was no wind here, and no rain. Not even rats skittered, though she moved through spaces where rats would readily have made their nests. Errencester Keep was inviolate.

Duke Uther, in his day, had taken the nearest way to make it so. And the spell he purchased, the ritual he used, was proof against time. No doubt he thought it proof against anything.

Emerging in one of the corridors behind the great hall, Morjune was immediately lost. But the force that pushed against her gave her a clue to where she

should go. It did not push evenly, from every direction, but had a home. An origin. She swam against it, rising foot by foot towards its source.

As, outside, we met our match and were gravelled.

There might have been a moment in which I could have dodged that blow. If there was, I didn't use it. I stood there on the narrow strip of stone, so astonished that I did not even think to move.

The thing's face, so innocent and yet so terrible, was split by a grimace of grief and pity.

The club took me in the ribs, and hurled me headlong off the battlements.

Under a stone slab in the great hall, Morjune found that which she sought. There was a hollow space there, about two strides long and a foot deep. In the hollow were laid the bones of a child. She could see, with her ghost-sight, the broken rib that had been sheared through when the sharp, sharp knife had pierced the child's heart.

"Magrete," Morjune whispered. "Wake up."

For a long time, nothing. Then, *Go away*, Magrete whispered. The same words Morjune had spoken to me, when I asked her to make one in this endeavour. *Go away and leave me. I'm asleep.*

"You've slept long and late. It's time to wake up."

No.

"My comrades have come to free you."

Then they've come too late.

And after that, no more words.

I landed in the courtyard with a crash that broke every bone in my body. Robust as I am, it would be some time before I could move.

I was not given that time. The thing that had struck me jumped down after me, with terrible and perfect aim. It landed in the centre of my back. The shattering of my spine, the explosion of my lungs and lights stunned me, and for a little while I ceased to be.

Then my body began to knit itself whole again. The agony of being remade in this way was greater than the blow, the fall and the crushing all together. I lay and suffered, unable to move, unable to think.

When finally my eyes opened again, or knew themselves to be open, the first thing I saw was Jill. She was lying along the ground in twisted skeins, her mouth and eyes open wide in the semblance of a scream. There was no colour in either of her eyes. Whatever power was pressing on her had drained the magics out of them and left her – for the moment – empty.

That sight was so terrible, it was many moments before I saw what lay beyond her. Kel was fighting with a man. One sole man, and yet he did not fall. He was not one of the soldiers, for he wore no armour and carried no weapon. His yellow hair whipped in the wind, untrammelled by any helmet. He seemed to need none of these things. The swipes of Kel's great, curved claws did not come near him.

But his strokes found Kel. He flexed the fingers of his hands, in tiny movements like the caresses of a lover, and Kel staggered, as if great blows battered him. A stroke, and his back was bowed. A pass, and dark blood sprayed from his broken mouth.

Some of the blood landed in a puddle, and the puddle, taking the stain of it, cried aloud in dismay. The puddle was Peter.

"Magrete! Magrete, please! Talk to me."

But no. Nothing.

"Magrete, you've got to help us or my friends will fail. And if they fail you'll lie here forever!"

Still, nothing at all.

Kel was down, in a spreading pool of his own blood. Fed with the endless, stinging rain, the pool was quickly becoming a lake.

The man who bore no weapons stood over him, and raised both his hands above his head. Since all his gestures so far had been so small, and the effects so wide and terrible, I did not see how Kel would survive the bringing down of those hands.

Into that moment, Anna came. Nothing up to now had touched the man, and Anna did not succeed in touching him either. But she hit so hard, in her massy, churning shape of shapes, that the man was pushed aside ten feet or more. When his arms swept

down, with the fingers of both hands spread out wide, it was only grass and mud and a few cobbles that exploded. Kel was left alive.

But now the man turned his attention to Anna, and she fared no better than her brother had. Her stinger descended like a flail, and her body bore on him like a ship's anchor flung down, but still he stood four-square. We were dying, each and all, and there was nothing we could do. The blond man was proof against the strongest of us. And still the monster with the child's face tore and pulled at me, rendering what was left of me into smaller and smaller pieces.

It came to me then, as my body surrendered perforce to this dissolution, that I had seen hair of such a bright colour once before. It had been a great many years ago, but the occasion had been memorable. A man like this had stood by when I was raised up out of the earth and made – after a fashion – to live again.

Was it possible that this man and that other were not two, but one? That this was Cain Caradoc, the sorcerer who had taken out a piece of my soul as the price of my second birth?

It was possible, I decided. And if it was possible, other things might be possible too. There was, after all, very little left to lose.

Morjune began to sing.

She sang a song that is sometimes called *I Will Tell You One-oh*. The Jews sing it, and the Christians likewise, and each believes they invented it. It's taught to children to make them remember their numbers, and the theme is call and answer.

I will tell you one-oh.

One is God in Heaven-oh.

I will tell you two-oh.

Two is the blameless babes, and one is God in Heaven-oh.

I will tell you three-oh.

Three went in the furnace, two is the blameless babes and one is God in Heaven-oh.

I will tell you four-oh.

Four the gospel creatures, three went in the furnace, two is the blameless babes and one is God in Heaven-oh.

And so on, for as long as you can count. Morjune knew it all the way up to thirteen, and so she sang. Then she began again at one.

Stop it! Magrete wailed at last. *Stop singing! I'm trying to sleep.*

"Sleep later, lazy girl. For now, you have to listen. I'm Morjune, the witch. Well, that's what they call me. I was killed before my time, just like you were, though they killed me out of fear and you out of cunning and policy. We should be friends, you and I."

No. Leave me be. I don't have any friends.

"You did have, once."

No.

"When you were alive, I mean."

No.

"There was the boy, Peter. He loved you well."

A silence.

I thought he would come for me. I waited. He never came.

"Oh, but he did. Small as he was, he hammered on the gate of Errencester and defied the lords inside. He called them cowards, and murderers, to seal their castle safe against siege and sundering with a maiden sacrifice. He laid such names on them, it made the men blush and the women weep."

Another silence.

And then what?

"They scored him with whips, and broke him with cudgels. And afterwards they threw him, weighted with stones, into Kirkul River, where he has bided ever since. But now, this very day, he comes again."

He is here? Peter is here?

"He's in the castle, but not in the keep. He can't come to you, Magrete, because of the spell they made all those long years ago. The spell they wove out of your murder."

A third silence. But this one was different from the other two.

Tell him, Magrete whispered.

Tell him I'm coming.

I closed my eyes. Actually just one eye, the other having been plucked out of my head.

I closed my ears to Anna's screams. Even now, they were screams of wrath as much as of pain. Cut and crushed and drawn though she was, she would not fall – because if she fell, she would leave Kel's body undefended.

I closed every sense but one. I could not taste my blood. I could not feel my pain, or the chill rain as it fell on me. Nothing was left inside my head but me.

And – I hoped, I prayed – the *other* me.

If the flax-haired man was truly Cain Caradoc, then his monster might well be the piece he took from me. I would not have known its face. A few glimpses in mirrors and meres, many a year and gone, had left no sense of what I was. I only knew that the beast that assailed me bore a child's face, and therefore must have had a child, or a part of a child, in its making.

I reached out to it.

And found it.

And knowing it for mine, I drew it into me.

The sorcerer felt the change at once. He forgot his attack on Anna and turned to face me. I mean, he turned with that intention, but I was already too big. He faced my twisted thigh, my splintered leg, the bones of my calf and shin as they folded themselves back into my swelling, towering body.

Cain Caradoc had claimed such a tiny part of me for his use, but the magics he had worked with it had been vast beyond imagining. And now I was opening the rest of myself to those same magics. I burgeoned like a tree, a century's growth packed into a few wild seconds.

"*Per potestatem* - - " the sorcerer bellowed. I swung my fist and he soared, arse over head, across the bailey yard. A wall stopped his flight, and his abominations, forever more, though in truth my mighty hand had already crushed him into ruin.

I'm here, Magrete cried, in all our ears. *I'm with you. Oh, I'm with you! Where is Peter?*

Peter was spilled on the ground and too weak to answer her, but she saw him there and flung herself on him, into him, greedy for the touch of the one that had ever loved her best.

So now the spell that kept the keep from harm was broken. A maiden's sacrifice was the recipe, a maiden's soul the vital, secret thing that bound the stones together stronger than mortar. Until the maiden woke, and knew herself, and left the keep.

I struck the walls with my hands, again and again. When the stones began to crumble, I pushed my fingers in between them and wrenched at them to widen the gap. It was hard work, but by and by Jill came up on my left-hand side and Anna on my right, and the three of us went at it with a will.

Inside the walls, like the meat inside a nut, we found Duke Ebberlin and his thanes, his wife and her serving wenches, a few counsellors, merchants and parasites, a few cooks and vassals, and another score or so of soldiers.

Anna ate the Duke, and Jill despatched his lady. She was a sorceress, too, but she had only journeyman skills and could not command a power as old as our Jilly's.

The soldiers had lost all heart by this time, and tried to run away. We should have let them go, but we were in a blood rage and killed them to the last man. Kel and Anna ate a great many of them, which is a hard way to die. Others looked Jill in the eye, which is harder still. The ones I squeezed and twisted and broke with my house-sized hands probably had the best of it.

Peter was himself again, by this time, and called us to a halt – berating us, besides, for taking out our anger on those who had no hope of hurting us. The battle being won, he said, what we were doing now was only slaughter.

And much more to the same tune, until we came back to ourselves and submitted again to the reins of reason. We allowed the survivors to go forth unmolested, only enjoining them never again to return to Errencester, or Cosham village, or the demesnes round about, on pain of the death they had escaped that day.

"What now?" Jill asked.

And it says much that she asked it. For she had lived ten thousand years, and a thousand more, and never needed to weigh one course against another until that day.

"Now," I said, "we take our reward."

"That's not what was meant!" the man Bertram protested. He had to shout to bring his words to where my ears were, because I was still as tall as a tower. That was intentional. I wanted there to be no mistaking the seriousness of our purpose.

"It's what was said," I told him. "You promised us a home."

"But Errencester Castle is the strongest keep in the county! It was ever the dwelling of this land's lord. If you stay in it - - "

“We’ve no interest in ruling you. But we don’t much care to live with you, either. Some of us have been down that road before, and it didn’t end well for us.”

“Armies will come to hale you out of there,” the woman warned. “As moths come to a flame.”

I smiled. “And they’ll fare as well as moths do, when they come to a flame.”

They made more noise, but nothing to the purpose. They had meant to petition the Lord Howard or the Count Tremegne, or this one or that one, and by offering Errencester up as a kind of bride-price to have a sweeter and a longer honeymoon. But that did not fit with our design, and we gave it no thought.

We were a family now. We were a seven, and so we meant to stay, until the waters below and the waters above held congress again and the whole green Earth was whelmed.

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Rhiannon McHarrie| Rhiannon McHarrie is a postgraduate researcher at the University of Northampton undertaking her PhD on the representations of mental health within superhero films. Her PhD explores the connection between how superheroes are depicted as undergoing trauma and the effect this has on them within the narrative in order to examine how these superheroes are shown to be representing mental health issues as a result of this trauma. She also has a chapter featured in a book entitled 'Mental Health and Fandom' set to be released in 2021 which looks at the importance of mental health within the MCU fandom.

Luke Holmaas | Luke Holmaas is a PhD candidate in film at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His research centers around gag-based comedy in contemporary Hollywood cinema, with additional work centering around transmedia comedy, satire, gender and comedy, and the films of Joe Dante.
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identity and representations of race and ethnicity, exile, feminist theory and postcolonial literature.

Mike Carey | Mike Carey is a novelist, comic book writer and screenwriter. He is best known for the post-apocalyptic novel *The Girl With All the Gifts*, and for the movie adaptation for which he wrote the screenplay. He also wrote the DC Comics series "Lucifer", now a long-running TV series, and the Felix Castor supernatural crime thrillers. His most recent novels are *The Book of Koli* and *The Trials of Koli*, both published in 2020. They comprise the first two-thirds of a trilogy, to be completed in March 2021. The short story featured here was originally published in *Dark And Stormy Nights* (2020).
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Duarte Amaral Netto | Duarte Amaral Netto is a photographer and photography teacher at the Instituto Politécnico de Tomar. He is a founding member of HÉLICE, an advanced school of photography based in Lisbon, and Propeller, a bi-annual publication on photography. His first solo exhibition in 2002 with the art gallery Modulo – Centro Difusor de Arte toured the Netherlands with solo exhibitions in Nouvelles Images in Den Haag and MK Galerie in Rotterdam in 2003. In that same year, Duarte was awarded the Grand Prix du 48ème Salon de Montrouge, in Paris. Having represented Portugal in "100 photos pour l'Europe" in Paris, Duarte was also selected for several festivals and events such as the "European Night" in Arles in 2006 and Plat(t)form in Winterthur (2014). In 2012, Duarte was nominated for the 8th Edition of the BES PHOTO AWARD, with exhibitions at the Berardo Museum in Lisbon and Pinacoteca de São Paulo, Brazil.
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