

3-1-2012

A Literature of Transgression and Subversion:
Review of John Clute's *Pardon This Intrusion:
Fantastika in the World Storm*

Gerry Canavan

Marquette University, gerard.canavan@marquette.edu

SF-TH Inc

A Literature of Transgression and Subversion

Pardon This Intrusion: Fantastika in the World Storm. Essex, UK: Becon, 2011. iv + 369 pp. £16 pbk. by John Clute

Review by: Gerry Canavan

Science Fiction Studies, Vol. 39, No. 1 (March 2012), pp. 127-129

Published by: [SF-TH Inc](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5621/sciefictstud.39.1.0127>

Accessed: 02/10/2013 13:38

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



SF-TH Inc is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Science Fiction Studies*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

conservative imagery is at odds with the critique of heteronormativity offered by the first film; unfortunately, this observation comes at the end of the chapter, losing an opportunity to explore the contrasts between subversive and recuperative representations of monstrous bodies in Tsukamoto's layered films.

Two live-action films from 2001, Kurosawa Kiyoshi's *Kairo* and another film by Oshii Mamoru, *Avalon*, make up the backbone of Part III. Here Brown explores the implications for human subjectivity of increasing technological mediation within a world where "machines ... communicate much better with each other than do humans" (114). In his reading, *Avalon* is more hopeful than the horrific solipsism found in *Kairo*, and he stresses the potential of learning to "read the codes" that otherwise oppress and constrain (137). Brown is careful to note, however, that even Kurosawa's film ponders how easily such a practice can be implemented if the "codes" themselves construct the subject that learns to read them (154). As in the previous chapter, Brown's strongest and most exciting analyses come when he goes beyond his readings of the texts themselves and looks at their transcultural implications, in this case exploring how they relate to the concept of the *hikikomori*—secluded Japanese young people who shut out the world for months or even years (118-19). Brown's citation of sociopolitical perspectives suggests that a social phenomenon restricted to Japan and parts of Asia is in fact an aspect of how subjects are constructed within culturally specific contexts under globalized capitalism and pervasive communication technologies. We are left with the implication that, as in the best sf, the potential exists for multiple and localized reinterpretations of increasingly dominant and universalist discourses that discursively limit possibilities for what it means to be human.

Despite some less-explored tangents and my concerns about chapter ordering, *Tokyo Cyberpunk* is an exciting study that is at its best when it considers the transcultural theoretical value of Japanese visual culture. Its detailed bibliography makes it ideal for university library collections, as well as for teachers and researchers who are interested in the expansion and further complication of the existing work on sf, transnational cultural studies, and critical posthumanism.—**Jonathan Smith, Wilfred Laurier University**

A Literature of Transgression and Subversion. John Clute. *Pardon This Intrusion: Fantastika in the World Storm*. Essex, UK: Becon, 2011. iv + 369 pp. £16 pbk.

"Pardon this intrusion," says the Creature to the blind man at approximately the midway point of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). For John Clute, editor of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1979; rev ed. 1993; online ed. 2011) and *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997), among many other credits, this moment is more than just an evocative title for an anthology collecting recent essays, readings, introductions, and occasional writings—it structures in some basic sense the experience of modernity as such. "He, or it, has never uttered a word before this moment," Clute writes. "He stands now before the exiled gentleman from the previous world, whose literal blindness tells us literally that

he cannot understand the nature of the new order of things looming above him” (14).

Pardon this intrusion—“the first words of the new century”—signifies for Clute both the beginning of modernity and the beginning of *fantastika*, his name for the supergenre that includes fantasy, science fiction, and horror. Here Clute sidesteps the anxieties of genre definition and differentiation that have dominated—or plagued—sf studies at least since Darko Suvin’s famously exclusionary *cognitive estrangement*; in Clute’s hands all the many genres become sibling instances of a single overarching universal. “Fantastika” names that large class of fictional works that are understood by both writer and audience to describe fantastic, unreal, and impossible events, an important principle of literary classification, Clute claims, only during the Enlightenment. Prior to this, the presence or absence of impossible things was not an especially noteworthy feature of a text; afterwards, it became the first criterion, the chasm dividing the serious (mimetic realism) from the irrational, the childish, and the frivolous (fantastika).

But *fantastika* survives this diminishment and quickly becomes a literature of transgression and subversion, the explosive return of those categories of human experience that Enlightenment rationalism had sought to repress. *Fantastika* becomes, in essence, the *critique* of what is called reality—it becomes reality’s inescapable other half, its darker shadow. (Even the terms we use to describe this relationship are themselves a type of *fantastika*; already we are speaking the language of *doppelgängers*, of Jekylls and Hydes.) In this sense the birth of *fantastika* is really the moment when History itself is born: “Genres began when the creation of geologic time and evolutionary change began to carve holes in reality, which became suddenly malleable; when, for the first time, the human imagination (as in the French Revolution) could conceive of altering, by fiat, both human nature and the world we inhabit” (3). Key to this inversion is the host of post-Enlightenment scientific discoveries that show Planet Earth itself to be fragile, unstable, *irrational*, and constantly in flux—discoveries that have recast the human race not as the privileged children of God but rather as “a species clinging to a ball that may one day spin us off” (23-24). This is the third component of Clute’s title, “the world storm”: the unceasing, vertiginous pulse of a planetary history that seems to be propelling us faster and faster towards utter ruin.

In the light of all this radical contingency, the unrealities of *fantastika* are, paradoxically, realer than Reality and truer than the Truth. Here *fantastika* becomes in Clute’s hands something more than just another literary genre; it becomes an essential mode of human thought, perhaps the very mood of modernity itself. *Fantastika* is the literary genre most appropriate to a world that has lost its grounding, a reality that no longer seems to be quite real. Consequently, where Suvin privileges the formal “cognitive estrangement” that is constitutive of sf, and where others (such as China Miéville) have favored the freer play of the imagination native to fantasy and “weird tales,” Clute’s approach to genre favors instead the ineffable and monstrous intrusions that characterize horror and terror. For Clute, it is Kurtz’s deathly gaze—the *horror*,

the horror—that is fantastika’s most essential encounter with modernity, though he might have cited alongside Kurtz such paradigmatic figures as Benjamin’s impotent Angel of History, who sees only catastrophes in the storm of progress blowing us away from Paradise, or Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, for whom history is a nightmare from which he is fighting to awaken. For Clute, Horror is the most vital form of fantastika because the horror at its core is always that of recognition, of seeing truths one does not want to see but cannot ignore: “It is the task of modern horror to rend the veil of illusion, to awaken us. Horror (or Terror) is sight.... Horror (or Terror) is what happens when you find out the future is true” (42).

Here, I think, we can see Clute’s theoretical contribution to the larger field of sf studies most clearly. Where the Suvinian/Jamesonian approach to sf has always tended to focus on literary figurations of utopia (either as a manifest *program* or as a latent *impulse*), Clute’s fantastika is in some basic sense *incompatible* with utopia. His approach argues not only that the genres of fantastika are “inherently better designed to sight disaster than to plan solutions,” but also that “it may in fact be the case that sighting and planning are very nearly incompatible operations of the human imagination” (54–55). The task before fantastika is not to *change* history, then, but to *recognize* it—and so the formal aesthetic undergirding all fantastika becomes not utopia but “planetary dread” (55). But Clute’s version of the genre is no less politically relevant for this revision. Where postmodernity for Jameson denotes the exhaustion of our ability to conceive of History, or of a future that might be different from the present, postmodernity for Clute is similarly “a series of exercises in denial” and “the creation of a world society founded in amnesia” (68). But the temporal orientation of our resistance to this crisis has been entirely reversed. At the end of Clute’s extended meditations, we find that fantastika is not really a genre of the future at all. It is instead a genre of the past, of history—what Milan Kundera called the struggle of memory against forgetting.—Gerry Canavan, Duke University

The Power of the Narrators. L. Timmel Duchamp. *Narrative Power: Encounters, Celebrations, Struggles*. Seattle, WA: Aqueduct, 2010. 260 + viii pp. \$19 pbk.

This collection of sixteen essays explores the powerful effects of various narrative strategies in shaping our lives. The essays are mostly written by sf/f authors, along with a few academics. Of course, the boundary is not absolute—many of the writers have backgrounds in academia and, of course, Samuel R. Delany is an active professor as is Susan Palwick. The majority of these essays grapple with the ways in which narrative has been used to disempower or to liberate subjugated groups; therein lies the collection’s inherent interest as well as its oversight. Certainly narrative is of central importance to the human experience, and understanding its function can help us to take control of that experience. At the same time, many of the essays in this collection overstate the power of narrative, effacing the way material power determines our lives. Too many of these essays present material power as an