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Review: Reinventing the Wheel

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locked in the hall of mirrors where the ‘I’ fights its own shadows?” (68). Moreover, when the first-person singular is preceded by the word “the” (as it is in Gomel’s query above), does “I” not then transform into a third-person “it”? What if the grammatical third person is in fact another pronoun for the grammatical first person? What if consciousness—of other selves, of one’s own self—is unavailable for any kind of narrative experience? This last speculation is one that Gomel addresses with special astuteness. “The plot of alien infestation inscribes an intratextual transformation of a human being into an alien,” she writes:

Thus, it poses significant theoretical questions about the narrative representation of subjectivity. Narrative voice and focalization are the standard tools of such representation. Can these tools cope with an alien subjectivity located in a human body; that is, lacking the external, corporeal signs by which nonhumans are ordinarily marked in SF? And if they fail, what does this failure tell us about the limits of psychological realism and its underlying assumptions about human ontology? (95)

As Gomel argues persuasively, the brilliance of science fiction resides in its power to reveal “the basic disparity between the narrative techniques used to represent the human subject and the thematic concern with the posthuman…. Novels of alien infestation are textual sites where the narrative techniques of humanism splinter under the thematic impact of dealing with the ontological Other” (100). This may be the most striking lesson that Gomel’s provocative book has taught me: alien figures expose the rift between conventional narrative techniques and posthuman issues. Perhaps along similar lines, science-fictional pronouns expose the rift between conventional grammar and a posthuman ethical system—a system capable of comfortably answering questions such as “What if the Other is a moral agent but with a morality different from mine? What if compassion backfires when my own intuitions provide no clues to the desires and needs of my interlocutor? How do we navigate in a world where forms of agency are as multiform as the biological configurations of posthuman bodies?” (5). While such questions are not theoretical—cybernetic organisms, for example, already exist, and there have always been fundamental limits to the self’s ability to identify with the other—“posthumanism” remains more “theory” than “practice.” What will it take for posthumanism to become an applied way of life? Will it take a new science-fictional grammar? An alien invasion? Both?—Seo-Young Chu, Queens College


As critical work on science fiction becomes more mainstream across multiple disciplines, we see more and more scholarship that does not take the disciplinary assumptions and well-worn thematic concerns of “science fiction studies” as its starting point. As a development this is, paradoxically, both
very welcome and very frustrating: welcome in the sense that such new approaches have the potential to breathe new life into our sub-discipline, but frustrating in the sense that such work often feels like an unnecessary attempt to reinvent the wheel—or, perhaps worse yet, that it treats itself as a landmark expedition into virgin territory without taking any note whatsoever of the extensive work that has already been done in the field. Such as it is, for better and for worse, with *Religion in Science Fiction*, a book whose focus on the genre’s uses and abuses of religious thinking both benefits from and is significantly harmed by its independence from decades of sf scholarship. Neither the words “Suvin” nor “Jameson” appear anywhere in the text; “Le Guin” is mentioned only a few times in passing, once in a reference to her anthropologist father; “Atwood” appears only in the context of her famous frustration with the science-fiction label; nor is there any reference to Samuel R. Delany, Stanislaw Lem, James Tiptree, Jr./Alice Sheldon, Kim Stanley Robinson, Nalo Hopkinson, or any of a host of other writers who have rightly become inevitable references within our field.

This deeply odd principle of selection extends even to authors who would seem absolutely unavoidable touchstones for a book on this subject; Philip K. Dick, for instance, appears only in a footnote about the comparatively much more obscure Roger Zelazny—and even then the reference is to the book he co-wrote with Zelazny, *Deus Irae* (1976), rather than to *VALIS* (1978), or to Dick’s famously bizarre “Exegesis” of his own myriad mystical experiences. Isaac Asimov, president of the American Humanist Association and in some sense the poster child for the often tense relationship between science fiction and religion, barely appears in the text, primarily in the context of a close reading of the comparatively obscure story “Trends” (1939)—and his successor-president at the AHA, Kurt Vonnegut, again does not appear anywhere in the text at all.

This striking independence of Hrotic’s work from mainline “science fiction studies” sometimes produces interesting quirks in the text, like his creation of the opposing categories “gSF” (for genre SF, by which he means the literary, “niche” sf of specialist fandom) and “mSF” (mainstream SF, your blockbuster hits)—essentially a replication of Suvin’s decision to throw out “95%” of what is published as sf, a posture long since been reconsidered by the field—or his prolonged development of the term “metanarrative” to identify, in the end, exactly what Damien Broderick had already named the “megatext” twenty years ago. In other cases the lapses seem much more severe: it seems extremely hard to credit Hrotic’s claim that there has been no significant “evolution” of science fiction’s use of religion since *The Sparrow* (1996) with Robinson, Hopkinson, Atwood, and so many others still hard at work, much less to admit his final conclusion that the category he calls gSF—the very category on which *SFS* still publishes three times a year—has thus become “extinct” altogether!

The deep disjuncture between the form of *Religion in Science Fiction* and the subfield of scholarship to which it would seem most naturally at home is all the more regrettable insofar as much of the book in isolation is quite
admirable, shining light on an area of sf that has perhaps become so naturalized to us that we do not talk much about it. With notable exceptions such as Clifford D. Simak—another author I find surprisingly underdiscussed in this treatment—science fiction of the so-called “Golden Age” really did generally predict the near-term extinction of religion, and really has proven to be spectacularly wrong on that account. And more recent science fiction really has had to come to terms with the persistence (and to a large extent radical resurgence) of religion, as it has to varyingly successful degrees in some of the more recent work Hrotic does take up late in the book (such as the aforementioned The Sparrow, or Neal Stephenson’s Anathem (2008), or Octavia E. Butler’s Parable novels [1993, 1998]).

Hrotic’s tracing of the contours of gSF over the decades also resurrects some unjustly neglected texts from authors who have tended to fall out of the familiar discursive habits of “science fiction studies,” such as Fred Barclay, Arthur Jones, and Leigh Brackett—authors we might very well take up and begin to read again, or perhaps read for the first time. Even Hrotic’s disciplinary standpoint as a cognitive anthropologist, as opposed to a literary critic or philosopher, marks his intervention as usefully distinct from our field’s usual patterns of inquiry; the approach is quite different from what we usually do, and quite usefully so, and the book surely worth reading. But I suspect many of Hrotic’s readers who originate within our academic sub-specialty will find themselves reading Religion in Science Fiction with the same sour mix of enjoyment and frustration I experienced, with the same bemused grimace on their faces, and with the same half-uttered “Okay, but what about…?” on the tips of their tongues.—Gerry Canavan, Marquette University


The first image in Anatomy of a Robot, Despina Kakoudaki’s engaging new study on the “cultural work of artificial people,” occurs on the second page. In it, an anonymous technician stands over Yul Brynner’s disassembled head. Brynner’s face, as cleanly removed from the rest of the head as if it were nothing more than a protective plate, sits on the chest of his supine body as the technician attends to the head’s exposed circuitry, itself sandwiched between a clean white bedsheet and a black cowboy hat. This screenshot from Michael Crichton’s 1973 film Westworld, taken before the robot’s haywire programming causes him to six-shoot his way to the junk bin, is an apt opener for a book that proposes to analyze the cultural significance of the robotic body, especially in terms of how such anatomies call attention to “interior” and “exterior” notions of physical functioning, to the often porous boundaries between public and private ownership, and to the complicated assumptions we have about individual identity. As this striking image of Brynner’s piecemeal cowboy suggests, the artificially constructed physiology functions as a stage upon which these tensions might play out. Kakoudaki excels at providing