History 1, 2, 3

Gerry Canavan

flow across complex landscapes of independence and in-dependence. And (if Hardt, Negri, Žižek, and Poster are right) they—alongside such Arab-Spring-anticipating works as Egyptian Ahmed Khaled Towfik’s *Utopia* (2009) and American Muslim G. Willow Wilson’s *Cairo* (2009)—tell us a lot about the globalized (that is, the already monetized, appropriated, and accumulated) future we can expect to inhabit in the auto-colonies.—*Mark Bould, University of the West of England*

**History 1, 2, 3.** In “The Climate of History: Four Theses” (*Critical Inquiry* [35.2, Winter 2009]: 197-222), Dipesh Chakrabarty offers an interpretive framework for apprehending the material and ideological conditions of a fully globalized world. History, he writes, has traditionally been imagined as a progressivist Grand Narrative called the “history of civilization”—or, even more grandiosely, “the history of the human race”—in which the everyday lives of actual humans fall away in favor of oblique social forces that reveal themselves to us as destiny (201-203). (For sf studies, of course, the natural reference here is the view-from-nowhere of Asimovian psychohistory.) Intervening against this Eurocentric faux-universalism, contemporary postcolonial theory has insisted instead on counter-histories that are characterized by multiplicity and difference; in this theoretical revision, globality collapses back into locality, and human beings consequently re-emerge as persons—especially the disenfranchised and the dispossessed, those who have continually been made to suffer in the name of “progress.”

The first dialectic, then, is the familiar one between center and periphery—between a metropole that imagines itself as the pinnacle of human achievement, and the disparate localities that have been denied inclusion in this totality. But Chakrabarty complicates this picture with the addition of a third history that exists alongside the first two: geologic time, *species* time. This is the moment of the Anthropocene, when the human race discovers itself to be an even more hyperbolic universal than the partisans of the Grand Narrative could have ever dreamed: an immense worldwide “geological agent,” whose collective actions are reshaping the coordinates of the natural world (208-209). In an era of cascading, ever-escalating environmental crises, “species time” reveals itself to us as a radical destabilization of the usual stakes of human history—indeed, as a kind of a sublime terror.

As Ursula Heise has noted in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (2008), since the 1960s and 1970s questions of the global have crystallized around a particular series of science-fictional visual images that, while familiar and perhaps unremarkable today, were revelatory and even shattering in their moment: Soviet and especially NASA images of the Earth as viewed from space, chief among them the “Earthrise” photograph obtained by Apollo 8 in 1968 and the “Blue Marble” photograph taken by Apollo 17 in 1972. In these images of the global totality, we find all three of Chakrabarty’s histories at work at once. “Blue Marble” and “Earthrise” signify the culmination of the progressivist narrative of human civilization (History 1)—but their shared photographic focus on the African
continent simultaneously reminds us of the radical particularity of that history, its costs and exclusions (History 2), while the sublime vision of the whole globe inevitably points us towards the radical fragility of our ecosystem and the destructive environmental consequences of global capitalism (History 3). From Octavia E. Butler’s *Parables* novels (1993-1998) to Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Mars* trilogy (1992-1995) to James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009) to Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003) to Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Wind-Up Girl* (2009) to Wanuri Kahiu’s *Pumzi* (2009) to Lauren Beukes’s *Zoo City* (2010), and on and on, the Blue Marble photographs perform in miniature the cognitive work of sf in a time of globalization: to register, interrogate, and reconcile these three very different histories, to uncover lurking behind the false triumphalism of History 1 other sorts of histories, and other kinds of globes. (Sincere thanks to Ian Baucom for his contributions to these thoughts. —Gerry Canavan, Marquette University)

**Welcome to the Vegas Pyongyang.** Recently I visited Las Vegas for the first time. During my brief stay, I explored the Strip and its famously themed spaces. An afternoon drifting through the arcades and tourist traps of Vegas’s Resort Corridor became a kaleidoscopic collage of hyper-stylized impressions of locales around the world—from Polynesia to Rome’s Trevi district. While each “locale” was conspicuously inauthentic, what remained uncannily authentic were the symptoms of globalization Vegas induced in me. To wander the Strip was to experience Vegas as a city-sized work of science fiction through which many elusive aspects of globalization became kinesthetically intelligible and intimately first-person. Finding “Mandalay Beach” yards from a decapitated statue of Lenin guarding “Red Square,” I felt the teleportal effects of “collapsing distance.” Watching species native to the Indo-Pacific swim inside an extravagant “Shark Reef Aquarium” remote from natural water sources, I grew a new sense—a glass-and-concrete sense—of Earth’s finite resources. Roaming vast indoor acreage busy with voices speaking foreign languages, navigating clock-deprived malls reminiscent of shops in an international airport, I lost track of local time while somehow amassing a surplus of stray time-zones that jammed my circadian rhythm. Artificial jetlag descended upon me.

The next day, departing McCarran International (itself an extension of the Strip), I fell asleep during takeoff and dreamed of a spectral addition to Vegas’s cityscape: a replica of the 105-story Ryugyong. Located in the capital of what is arguably the world’s last communist state, Pyongyang’s “Hotel of Doom” (additional epithets: “Death Star,” “Ghostscraper”) is strikingly evocative of an alien rocketship. In my dream, Ryugyong’s silhouette was eerily at home among the Stratosphere, “Camelot,” Luxor Pyramid, “Eiffel Tower,” and other landmarks anthologized in the skyline’s eclectic jumble of icons. At the hotel’s entrance stood female traffic “greeters” chiming “Welcome to the Vegas Pyongyang!” while directing visitors with flawlessly choreographed precision. Inside: everywhere an ambiance of simulated luxury and dissonant facades. Portraits glorifying “Dear Leader” adorned the walls of Starbucks. Billboards advertised the hotel’s signature spectacle: “Arirang Mass Gymnastics!” Lurid