

# Science Fiction beyond Borders



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# INTRODUCTION

SHAWN EDREI

Space is not the final frontier anymore.

When Mikhail Bakhtin speaks of the chronotope—the specific configuration of space and time that informs the setting of a fictional work—he argues that setting almost always informs the genre of said work. If a reader is told that a story is set in eighteenth-century England, within the darkened halls of a crumbling mansion, their generic expectations will lean towards the tropes and techniques common to Gothic fiction. A medieval-esque realm that never existed connotes classic high fantasy. A nondescript house in suburban America circa the 1950s may be the site of some family melodrama.

But science fiction—as a phenomenon that has transcended the category of “genre” to become a mode of writing in itself—resists these frameworks. Indeed, if adventures on Mars in the twenty-third century, alien invasions of Victorian London, and time loops in downtown Manhattan have any common ground at all, it is in their capacity to transcend borders and boundaries thought to be sacrosanct. These boundaries may be conceptual, generic, metaphysical, or scientific; the method of transgression may be metaphorical, allegorical, or presented as a thought experiment; but at its core, science fiction defines itself as the sole literary genre that not only attempts but also *demand*s that its works resist conventional theories and approaches in storytelling and literary criticism, and that its authors make full use of the imaginative exploratory powers granted to them.

This book collects papers presented at the 2014 and 2015 Science Fiction Symposium, an annual event held at Tel Aviv University. The contributors are an eclectic mix of scholars from different disciplines, institutes, and walks of life, all of whom demonstrate the range and diversity of science-fictional texts and the ease with which this mode of writing entangles itself into every other aspect of modern life.

*Science Fiction beyond Borders* begins with a chapter by Prof. **Elana Gomel** of Tel Aviv University, a long-time champion of the fantastic genres in academia, who discusses posthuman subjects in science fiction

who have been marked by extreme corporeal modifications, such as cyborgs, mutants, and human/alien hybrids, and explores how these subjects are represented and what their existence implies for narrative theory.

**Anat Karolin** analyses the works of Ursula K. Le Guin and Greg Egan with regards to their unique attempts to imagine new configurations of sexuality and gender. Focusing on Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Egan's *Distress*, Karolin breaks down the subverted gender norms each author integrates into their worlds and the ways in which the texts both resist and are subject to conventional dichotomies of thought with regards to binary sex.

China Miéville's *Embassytown* serves as the foundation for a discussion on ethics in science fiction, as **Naomi Michalowicz** provides an extensive view of Miéville's text as an adaptation of the Original Sin narrative, arguing that while the novel subverts the traditional moral implications of the biblical Fall, it also attempts to substitute an alternative system of ethics that prioritises preservation of life and survival writ large in place of explicitly moral frames of reference.

The focus then turns to two chapters that offer a closer perspective on a popular contemporary trope—the figure of the monster and the contextual shift of its presence from horror to science fiction. **Moriel Ram** interprets the zombie's rise in popularity over the past decade as a fictionalised account of the threats and failures of modern science. As a transgressive figure in its own right, the zombie has become an ideal platform to explore intersections of race, class, gender, age, and disability in the modern world.

**Razi Zeidan** continues this thread by examining how concepts of devolution and monstrosity were presented in H.G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, and the strong influence of Darwinian theories on the formative years of science fiction as a literary genre.

The question of what it means to be human (and what happens when scientific breakthroughs explode such categories) also lies at the heart of **Ulrike Goldenblatt's** chapter, which discusses cloning as a recurring trope in science fiction, and the different ways in which particular works featuring clones have complicated baseline assumptions pertaining to human biology, identity, and perceptions of morality.

A further exploration of transhumanism is provided by **Slava Bart** as he traces the connections between the movement and performance art, futurism, decadence, Russian cosmism, and pagan religious practices. Bart argues that the erasure of boundaries between mind, body, nature, art, and technology predates science fiction itself, and has come to reverberate

most powerfully in contemporary representations of self-destructive transhumanism.

Two perspectives on the fantastic in the Israeli literary landscape follow. **Avital Pilpel** investigates the seeming lack of utopian imagination in Hebrew science fiction, tracing the genre's initial manifestation in 1950's and 1960's pulp magazines through to its eventual diminished presence in favour of fantasy and dystopian writing.

Co-editor **Danielle Gurevitch** offers an alternative explanation for the absence of angelic figures appearing in the Israeli streets, examining depictions of the daily reality in Israeli fantastic literature and the way in which conventional generic strategies have been adapted to suit different cultural values, producing strong dystopian texts since the 1980s.

We conclude with two chapters that examine the transgressive properties of science fiction from a different angle—as a transmedia phenomenon that dominates every narrative platform, from novels to film, to television and video games. **Asaph Wagner** explores genre hybridity in role-playing games such as *Dark Heresy* and *Shadowrun*, detailing how these draw on symbols and tropes of both science fiction and fantasy in order to create amalgamated fictional worlds. Wagner argues that these hybrid settings, informed by the specific juxtaposition of particular fantastic tropes, lead to a singularly unique type of role-playing experience.

Finally, **Hila Peleg** discusses the works of John Scalzi and the use of the “Rip-Off” technique as a form of intertextuality that crosses media in order to create a network of allusions and references for the purpose of manipulating those same generic expectations.

The quality and variety of these chapters demonstrate the ease with which science fiction is able to penetrate disparate aspects of contemporary life, informing literary trends, applications of technology, lines of philosophical thought, and much more. Whatever frontiers remain undiscovered that the human imagination can conceive of, we can be certain that science fiction will get there first, revealing the many possibilities that lie ahead.



## CHAPTER ONE

# CHARACTER DEGREE ZERO: SPACE AND THE POSTHUMAN SUBJECT

ELANA GOMEL

### **Bodies or Minds?**

Posthumanism has become central to the philosophical and ethical debates in the humanities. It is, however, mostly seen as a subject rather than an approach. In other words, studies of posthumanism are apt to focus on issues (animal rights, post-liberal ethics) or icons (the cyborg, the alien, the hybrid). But posthumanism is seldom regarded as a theoretical framework that can inform traditional fields, such as narrative theory. Exceptions, such as Bruce Clarke's *Posthuman Metamorphosis: Narrative and System* (2008), focus on the philosophical underpinnings of both narratology and posthumanism rather than on specific ways in which posthuman subjectivities are represented/generated in narrative texts. And conversely, narratology is perceived as too "technical" or "narrow" to have much to say on such issues as the nature of the posthuman subjectivity or the ethics beyond humanism.

In this essay I want to take a step toward posthumanist narratology. Specifically, I want to consider posthuman characterisation. Defined as the "invest[ment] with specific qualities" of a narrative actant, characterisation has often been seen as a minor aspect of narrative theory, especially in relation to the construction of fictional worlds or issues of mimesis (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 34). I will argue, however, that characterisation in science fiction (SF) can have important implications for the philosophical and ideological problematic of posthumanism. The most important question raised by posthumanism is the nature of subjectivity beyond the human. The representation of non- or post-human characters in SF can help to answer this question.

Posthuman subjects in SF are often marked by extreme corporeal modifications, hence the genre's narrative zoo of cyborgs, mutants, and human-alien hybrids. Criticism follows suit: the posthuman subject is equated with the posthuman body. The title of Sherryl Vint's 2007 book *Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction*, is characteristic of the trend. Vint's book seamlessly moves from the malleability of the body to the transformation of the mind: "It is important to examine the consequences of this [posthuman] concept of self, for we are living in a time when technology is able to radically alter the body ..." (Vint 2007, 7).

There are two reasons for the focus on the body: one technical, and one philosophical. Technically speaking, visible difference makes characterisation easy. Posthuman bodies can be literally put on display. The long literary tradition of monsters offers a ready-made vocabulary for posthumanism in SF. Just add scales, tentacles, implants, or any other visual detail that can signify a departure from the human norm, and the conundrum of representation is easily solved. This results in what might be called "iconic" characterisation, in which the difference of a posthuman subject is reduced to his/her/its appearance.

The philosophical reason for emphasising corporeality stems from the posthumanist rebellion against the Cartesian duality of body and mind. Much of the theoretical energy of posthumanism has been expended in battling Cartesian dualism, seen as philosophically and ideologically pernicious. Hayles' classic *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) critiques the neglect of the body in cyber-culture and calls for a more "corporeal" and bio-centric approach to subjectivity. In his gloss on Hayles, Anthony Miccoli is even more categorical in his insistence upon the primacy of the body in subjectivity: "it is the visceral human that the posthuman has yet to address" (Miccoli 2010, 8).

But iconic posthumanism is insufficient on both counts. In terms of narrative representation, simply assuming that corporeal changes signal a radically transformed mind is bound to fail. Psychological realism has created a sophisticated set of narrative tools for representing the inner world of the liberal-humanist subject: first-person narration, focalisation, free indirect discourse, plot coherence, and others. Re-purposing these tools results in aliens and cyborgs who behave like your next-door neighbours (see Gomel 2014). Instead of true posthumans, we encounter humans in drag.

In terms of the critique of dualism, calls for "embodied" posthumanism often miss the mark. No matter how many philosophical slings and arrows have been aimed at Descartes, the simple truth is that self-conscious

subjects (whether humans or not) still experience themselves as “ghosts in the shell,” to adopt the title of the celebrated anime. In fact, cognitive science shows that self-awareness arises out of the detachment of the imaginary self from the visceral experience of the body, the detachment that finds an expression in “mirror self-recognition” (Keenan et al. 2003, 60).

The disjunction between body and mind is a necessary condition of fictional characters in literature. Such characters by definition only exist as “ghosts” within make-believe fictional worlds. Narrative characterisation enables the reader’s (re)construction of a disembodied subjectivity. But characterisation operates differently in verbal and visual texts. In the latter, the body of a character is always directly represented, whether as that of an actor or of a computer simulation. In the former, a character’s corporeality may only be partially described or not described at all. As a result, visual narratives, such as movies, graphic novels, or video games, tend to be more invested in iconic characterisation. But their vocabulary of monstrosity pulls them toward the simplistic moral stereotypes of humanism (good/evil; beautiful/ugly). Verbal narratives, on the other hand, are forced to deploy more sophisticated means of characterisation in representing their posthuman subjects. Paradoxically, while many posthumanist studies of fiction centre on the visual media, I would argue that it is precisely “old-fashioned” verbal narratives that are capable of developing new techniques for representing characters beyond human. I will consider several literary SF texts to describe one such technique: the conflation of character and space, which, for reasons that will become clear later, I will call “character degree zero.”

## Topologies of the Psyche

The humanist subject is defined by agency, free will, psychological depth, emotional affect, and desire for social integration. SF calls each of these qualities into question. The genre has created subjects who have no agency or self-consciousness (Peter Watts’ *Blindsight*, 2006), no possibility of free choice (Harey in Lem’s *Solaris*, 1961), no emotional or sexual affect (Greg Egan’s *Distress*, 1995), and no way of integrating into society (Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, 1968). Some of these subjects are aliens (*Blindsight*); some appear to be human but in fact are not (*Solaris* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*); some are genetically or neurologically modified human beings (*Distress*). But, as narrative characters, they all share one significant feature: they are flat.

The distinction between flat and round characters is one of the most basic in narratology. It goes back to E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). A flat character is one that can be summed up in a single descriptive phrase. A round character is psychologically complex, dynamic, and changing. A flat character has one or a few traits or dimensions; a round character has many. SF, along with other "popular" genres, was traditionally denigrated for its extensive use of flat characters. As James Gunn acknowledges, "the characters in science fiction seldom are fully realized people; often they turn out to be stand-ins for an attitude, a creed, a way of life, a society, or even the human race" (Gunn 2000, 101). Gunn proceeds to defend SF by arguing that it is a literature of ideas rather than characters; other critics shift the line of defence by pointing out that *some* SF characters are indeed rounded and complex. But few have tried to reassess the concept of the flat character itself, or to claim that it may express something more than the genre's deficiency or the author's lack of skill.

I will argue that the round character is a hallmark of psychological realism that has given us the fullest expression of the humanist ethos, the flat character is a harbinger of posthumanism. If a round character is a literary representation of the humanist subject, a flat character is posthuman.

This seems like a counter-intuitive statement for two reasons. First, flat characters had been a staple of literature long before anybody had heard of posthumanism. From allegorical figures such as Everyman to Dickens' comic obsessives, flat characters abound in the literary traditions in both the East and the West. Second, insofar as posthumanist characterisation has been a subject of critical discussion, it is assumed to reside in the complex avant-garde strategies of such writers as Thomas Pynchon, Kathy Acker, and Joseph McElroy, who deliberately undermine the realistic conventions of psychological representation. Avant-garde literature is highly conscious of its own status, emphasising what Mark Currie calls, "the conquest of cultural schizophrenia over narrative identity" (Currie 1998, 113). In other words, it is metafictional, subversive, and focuses on style rather than plot. Avant-garde postmodernism often dispenses with character altogether, deliberately generating what Currie describes as "narrative shipwreck" (Ibid., 121).

But the critical focus on the avant-garde has often prevented narrative theory from considering more subtle instances of posthumanist characterisation, especially in such "popular" genres as SF and horror (despite the fact that the very distinction between "popular" and "elite" literature was rendered obsolete long ago). I will argue that flat characters

in SF represent a new form of posthumanist subjectivity, different from either the allegorical figures of the past or the “narrative shipwreck” of the present. Rather, they embody the conflation between subject and space.

### Inside Out

The relationship between space and character has been a favourite of the many studies that have contested the traditional view of subjectivity as primarily temporal, composed of internal and external storytelling. According to this view, the self, “must be understood as processed, socially embedded, and readable through the self-stories in which it discursively manifests itself” (Kraus 2006, 106). On the other hand, Fredric Jameson famously defined the postmodern self as, “dominated by categories of space rather than categories of time” (1991, 16). With the rise of posthumanism, the idea that posthuman subjectivity is linked to space rather than time has become firmly entrenched. In “Narratology beyond the Human,” David Herman specifically connects spatiality with escape from the psychological and ethical constraints of the humanist self. He analyses a story by Lauren Groff whose nameless female protagonist becomes homeless and lost in the wilderness populated by animals and outcasts. Herman’s point is that while traditional narrative privileges the temporal progression (overcoming obstacles, achieving goals), the posthumanism focuses on the setting. The woman’s aimless wanderings through strange places can be read as, “her growing recognition of her place within a more-than-human world” (Herman 2014, 136).

But of course, such wanderings are the *sine qua non* of both SF and fantasy: the “spatial” genres in which the elaboration of the fictional world becomes the artistic dominant of the text. Most SF and fantasy plots are derivative or recycled: it is the setting, be it Mordor, Solaris, the Matrix, or a “Galaxy far away,” that becomes the locus of both the author’s creativity and the reader’s interest. The implications of this spatiality for the genre’s representation of subjectivity are more profound than might appear at first sight. The emergence of the psychologically complex, round character in realism was inextricably linked to the Newtonian paradigm of space and time, as Ian Watt showed in his classic study *The Rise of the Novel* (Watt 2001, 24). The Newtonian space is passive, uniform, and isotropic, a mere background to the character’s actions. The round character exists in a flat space. It might be argued that the complex topology of the pre-modern religious and mythological spacetime was introjected into the psychic structure of the humanist subject, whose Freudian complexity made up for the flatness of its physical background. But, with the rise of postmodernism

and posthumanism, the relationship between space and subject has shifted once again. Now we are back to confronting a flat character in a round world.

In SF, space ceases to be the passive medium for the protagonist's actions in time. Instead, the subject is embedded in, and integrated with, the setting. SF characters are flat because their inner space is outside them. They have no interiority of their own but inhabit a landscape that is complex, active, and psychologically charged. The process that generates such subjects might be called *character eversion* (in the dictionary meaning of eversion as the state of being turned inside out). As opposed to *pathetic fallacy*, in which the landscape echoes the character's inner state, in the eversion of subjectivity the character's inner state becomes an echo of the landscape. Space and subject exchange places.

The flat characters of pre-modern allegories are not generated by eversion; rather, they represent distinct aspects of the psyche or embody abstract concepts. The flat posthuman characters of SF, on the other hand, have little or no allegorical resonance. Their primary relation is with topology rather than deontology. They are the opposite of the realistic character whose complex psychological life is embedded in—indeed depends upon—the inert Newtonian space. The flat posthuman characters, on the other hand, have no interiority of their own but inhabit a space that is topologically complex, active, and psychologically charged, verging on autonomous agency.

## **Living in the Metaverse**

There are several ways in which character eversion may function in SF. One prominent strategy is represented by cyberpunk, which is a sub-genre of SF, “built around the work of William Gibson and other writers, who have constructed visions of the future worlds of cyberspaces” (Featherstone 1996, 3). Cyberpunk is a movement within the larger generic field of SF associated with such names as William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Lewis Shiner, Neal Stephenson, Pat Cadigan, and Rudy Rucker. It is characterised by infatuation with early computer technology, a hip sensibility, a dystopian vision of the near future, and a jazzy style. None of these elements is unique, but together they seduced a number of critics into believing that literature was finally entering the information age. George Slusser breathlessly praised the genre's ambitions:

In the cyberpunk world, to write SF is to make physical, even visceral contact with the mechanical and biological extensions of our personal infosphere (cyborgs, grafts, prostheses, clones) and beyond that, with the

image surrogate themselves (simulations, “constructs,” holograms) that now crowd and share our traditional fictional living space. (Slusser 1991, 2)

Cyberpunk has by now merged with general SF (or with reality), but in the 1980s and 90s, Gibson’s, Stephenson’s, and others’ representations of subjectivity were indeed highly innovative, though not necessarily in the way this is often understood. Slusser’s emphasis on “extensions” of subjectivity disregards the fact that there is no core subject at the centre. Cyberspace is not merely a new playing field for the postmodern subject, no matter how “decentered.” Cyberspace is all there is.

In the foundational cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* (1984) by William Gibson, Case the cyber-cowboy not merely *uses* computers, as his predecessors in the SF novels of Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein had already done. He *lives* inside a computer-simulated reality that is more important to him than the physical world inhabited by his body, which he contemptuously calls “meat.” Cyberspace is not an extension of his personality; rather, his personality is modelled by the topology of cyberspace. Everything that Case experiences—his hopes, his losses, his moments of sublimity—is externalised into events or domains (the two are often interchangeable) in cyberspace. When Case is cut off from cyberspace, he becomes “meat”: a mere inert physical substance. The Cartesian duality is preserved but in a particularly interesting way: the mind exists outside the body as a collective rather than individual entity, since cyberspace is a “consensual hallucination” shared by billions of plugged-in users.

Another cyberpunk novel, *Snow Crash* (1992) by Neal Stephenson, goes even further in externalising the mind. The protagonist (named, in a tongue-in-cheek fashion, Hiro Protagonist) operates in the virtual Metaverse, which contains simulacra of physical locales, such as Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Paris, all strung together in cyberspace without any regard for distances or boundaries. Protagonist’s actions are mapped onto the impossible space of the Metaverse in such a way that his actions and decisions become mere extensions of its vertiginous topology. Indeed, cyberspace contains the very text that describes it, since the premise of the novel is that language itself is a computer virus that infects the “real” world.

The way in which a character’s search for identity becomes embedded in the configurations of the setting is illustrated in the late cyberpunk novel *Solitaire* by Kelley Eskridge (2002), in which the heroine is locked up in a virtual cell for a crime she has not committed. The three spaces of the novel—the virtual, the physical, and the psychological—are all mirror-reflections of each other, avatars of the city of Hong Kong. To achieve

redemption, Jackal has to integrate all three. Her liberation from her virtual jail becomes simultaneously a return to the city and a return to sanity.

However, despite the importance of space in cyberpunk, many (though not all) cyberpunk texts appropriate traditional means of realistic characterisation, specifically “deep” psychological penetration into the character’s mind achieved by focalisation or first-person narration. This is particularly evident in *Neuromancer*, where Case is modelled after the brooding protagonists of the noir detective novels by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. The result is not particularly happy, as the convoluted heist plot and Case’s ruminations often interfere with the novel’s depiction of cyberspace. At the end, there is an unbridgeable gap between the virtual domain ruled over by a newly-emerged godlike AI and the physical “meat-space,” inhabited by the novel’s human characters. This gap is less obvious in Stephenson’s and Eskridge’s novels due to their strong metafictional elements, but ultimately the failure of cyberpunk to develop into a new genre independent of SF is due to its traditional concept of character as much as its inbuilt technological obsolescence. If the promise of cyberpunk is that, “virtual technology is welcomed as the nemesis of the transcendental ego and its imagination,” it is a promise that remains unfulfilled (Robins 1996, 140).

## On the Beach

A better example of character eversion is provided by those SF texts that are thematically concerned with the interaction between subject and space. Many such texts are also posthumanist in their approach to subjectivity, representing a transformation of a human character into a posthuman entity under the influence of an alien setting. What Herman sees as the implicit message of Groff’s novella—the protagonist’s “recognition of her place within a more-than-human world”—becomes an explicit theme in such SF works as Kim Stanley Robinson’s “A Short, Sharp Shock” (1990) and Jeff Vandermeer’s *Southern Reach* trilogy (2014).

Robinson’s novella follows the amnesiac protagonist who wakes up in an otherworldly ocean alongside a woman known only as “the swimmer.” Together, they hike the only land on this ocean world—an endless girding spine, a peninsula without a mainland. The identity of the protagonist (who calls himself Thel) is unknown. He never recovers his memory nor are we told whether his exile on the spine is an accident, a punishment, or perhaps a reward. Lost in a flow of strange encounters and striking

impressions, Thel becomes merely a roving eye, a moving point of view through which the reader is experiencing the landscape.

The spine is vividly evoked in poetic and yet precise descriptions. It is topologically impossible, “a landscape in reverse,” the “earth river” (Robinson 1996, 24). It is also double, harbouring its own reflection, which Thel periodically accesses by diving through a magic mirror. There is no explanation for any of the events surrounding the mirror, or for the peculiar creatures inhabiting the spine—fractal-faced women, tree people, and humanoid molluscs—who behave toward Thel and the swimmer with the capriciousness of a fever dream, intermittently helping and harming them. The novella deliberately undermines our expectations of causality, narrative coherence, or explanatory closure. The spine becomes the plot: Thel and the swimmer are literally driven on by the topography of the land. They have no desires and no goals independent of the place that contains them. The narrow strip of rock and sand, with its mesmerising beauty and elusive mystery, is the true protagonist of the novella, while Thel’s transparent consciousness is the narrative space it inhabits.

The inversion of space and character is emphasised at the very beginning of the novella, in which the drowning man is brought into consciousness by “a shattered image of a crescent moon,” at which “a whole cosmology bloomed in him” (Robinson 1996, 2). Thel is given reality by his impossible world, cosmology filling the void of his hollowed self.

Jeff Vandermeer’s *Southern Reach* trilogy, consisting of three books, *Annihilation*, *Authority*, and *Acceptance*, has a plot similar to Strugatskys’ *Roadside Picnic* (1972). A mysterious alien incursion has created a topologically distorted space—Area X—located somewhere in the south of the US. The area is only accessible through a single portal, but those who venture inside either do not come back, or come back psychologically and physically changed, mutated in unpredictable and often horrifying ways. The organisation known as the Southern Reach Authority sends successive expeditions to Area X, but the information they collect does not elucidate either the nature of the incursion or the ways of combatting it. Instead, the Authority becomes a bureaucratic labyrinth, infected by the same strangeness as the area itself.

*Annihilation* is narrated in the first person by a member of one of the expeditions, a nameless female biologist. *Authority* is exclusively focalised through a male agent named John who interrogates the biologist (or rather, her copy) when she comes out of Area X and eventually follows her back there. The third book is intermittently focalised through this copy and the lighthouse keeper who becomes the beachhead for the alien incursion. It

also contains chapters narrated in the second person and addressed to the director of the Authority who dies in Area X.

The most striking feature of the biologist's narrative voice in the first book is its flatness. Even when referring to her own emotional reactions, she sounds remote, an observer rather than a participant. Referring to her life before she was recruited to the expedition, she says, "my existence back in the world had become at least as empty as Area X. With nothing left to anchor me, I *needed* to be here" (Vandermeer 2014). This need is what drives her on, even as the other expedition members perish or disappear. She is following in the footsteps of her husband who had been in another expedition and came back as an empty shell filled with the strangeness of Area X. Her quest is not to find what happened to him but to become like him: a human-shaped alien site. As she says at the beginning of her quest, "Desolation tries to colonize you". The very notion of colonization is inverted: instead of space being taken over by humans, space takes them over.

Like Robinson's novella, Vandermeer's books are filled with elaborate descriptions of a magical terrain, where time is subsumed into space. Area X is pristine wilderness, cleansed of the signs of human habitation, and inhabited by alien entities, such as the monstrous Crawler, composed of human brain cells, who "writes" incomprehensible lines on the walls of its lair in living moss. Language, along with subjectivity, is absorbed into the landscape. As the biologist puts it: "Slowly the history of exploring Area X could be said to be turning into Area X" (Vandermeer 2014). This process of absorption continues in *Authority*, where Area X literally takes over the human institution meant to study and contain it.

Going back to Herman's call for "narratology beyond the human," character eversion is a perfect strategy for representing subjects that straddle the borderline between human and animal. Animals are incapable of temporally-organised narrative. But neurological research suggests that many animals do organise their experience in terms of visual or olfactory "maps" of their environment. Character eversion brings us closer to the animal vision of the world. In Vandermeer's trilogy, the biologist eventually metamorphoses into a many-eyed, multidimensional "leviathan" who passes beyond the limits of human language and human understanding.

The fusion between place and character in SF can also be seen politically, as an expression of the emerging eco-consciousness. Character eversion generates subjects who give up the temporal coherence of the

liberal-humanist self in favour of a more capacious and inclusive sense of belonging. They lose themselves but gain the world.

### **The Politics of Characterisation**

Character eversion in SF can be conceptualised using Roland Barthes' notion of "writing degree zero." Defined in his 1967 book of the same title, writing degree zero is a flat, neutral, transparent style whose aim is to expunge the writer's subjectivity, to be "delivered of history," and to "find again the freshness of a pristine state of language" (Barthes 1984, 74). The protagonists/narrators in Robinson's and Vandermeer's books are "characters degree zero," whose lack of agency and affect plunges them into an unmediated unity with the topologically impossible space. The texts enact the "deliverance from history" as a wholly spatial chronotope, devoid of both past and future, in which time becomes a function of geography. Their rich descriptions reach for a "pristine state of language," striving for the effect of visual immediacy rather than verbal coherence.

In Barthes' view, "writing degree zero" was a political act, meant to cleanse discourse of the accumulated traces of ideological falsehood. Similarly, character degree zero is a political figure. In its radical break with the Newtonian architecture of humanism, it inscribes an attempt to go beyond the anthropocentrism of traditional narrative discourse. This discourse is no longer adequate either narratively or politically. The "everted" characters, fading into the alien landscape, offer a revolutionary, if unsettling, view of the possibilities of interaction between humans and other living creatures: surely an important subject in the Anthropocene age.

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CHAPTER TWO

ANDROGYNOUS ALIENS  
AND GENDER MIGRANTS:  
EXPERIMENTS IN GENDERLESSNESS  
IN URSULA K. LE GUIN'S  
*THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS*  
AND GREG EGAN'S *DISTRESS*

ANAT KAROLIN

Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art. Very often in our art, the art of words. (Le Guin 2014)

With these words, part of her speech at the ceremony of the 2014 National Book Awards (where she was honoured with the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters), Ursula K. Le Guin voiced a reminder of the revolutionary power of literature. Le Guin admonished publishers and decision-makers in the literary marketplace for giving precedence to financial considerations over artistic ones. Though she spoke specifically about the commodification of books and the dangers literature faces in capitalism, the need she spoke of for “writers who can see alternatives to how we live now,” her fellow “writers of the imagination”—of science fiction and fantasy—touches upon every aspect of society.

Indeed, much has been written about science fiction as a genre uniquely structured so as to enable social and political criticism. Darko Suvin, for one, tried to provide a definition of the genre in his book *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*. Suvin defined SF as, “a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (Suvin 1979, 7–8). By “estrangement,” Suvin means a concept similar to

the term “ostranenie” coined by the Russian Formalists or Brecht’s concept of “alienation,” namely a representation that makes the object represented unfamiliar in order to evoke a renewed understanding of it. This, Suvin claims, is coupled in SF with a cognitive view, a search for rational understanding, which, “implies not only a reflection *of* but also *on* reality. It implies a creative approach tending toward a dynamic transformation rather than toward static mirroring of the author’s environment” (Ibid., 10). By introducing what Suvin calls a “novum,” a totalising change, which “deviates from the author’s and implied reader’s norm of reality” (64), writers of SF are able to investigate said reality, spanning aspects of self-perception, social, economic and political issues, and the physical conditions that make up our world.

One such aspect of society that permeates our sense of self and our understanding of others most pervasively is gender. It is not only a recurring theme in SF; it has become, as Brian Attebery shows in *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction*, “an integral part of the genre’s intellectual and aesthetic structure” (Attebery 2002, 10). Attebery explores how gender has been represented in SF from the 1930s and 40s, when “few writers found ways to investigate gender issues” (Ibid., 5), through the early feminist SF of the 1960s and on to contemporary works that put the issue at their centre. Gender, as he defines it, is, “is a way of assigning social and psychological meaning to sexual difference, insofar as that difference is perceived in form, appearance, sexual function, and expressive behaviour” (2). Attebery’s stance is clearly a feminist one; his definition is predicated upon what feminist theoreticians have struggled to assert over the last decades, namely what Judith Butler has called “gender performativity,” the understanding that gender isn’t some inherent quality determined by biological sex. Rather, it is comprised of:

acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires [that] create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality. (Butler 1999, 173)

Attebery highlights the pervasiveness of gender, since it is “rooted in biology but shaped by culture to such a degree that it is impossible to untwist the thread and say which strands are inborn—and which are acquired and arbitrary. There is no ‘natural gender’ any more than there is a natural language” (Attebery 2002, 3).

It is precisely this untwisting of the thread that is at the heart of many SF texts, not only as an attempt to subvert the binary opposition of masculine and feminine or blur the boundaries between them, but even to

the point of collapsing the categories themselves and trying to reach beyond them. Two such texts are Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Greg Egan's *Distress*. Whereas the former depicts an androgynous alien society, one in which there is no category of gender, the latter is a futuristic vision of our own Earth in which there are new gender categories. But even in Egan's world of seven recognised genders, there is one category that receives the most attention and is presented as preferable to the others, and defies the reader's expectations by being not less human but more so, a human subjectivity free from the constraints of both gender and sex: asexuality. It would seem that *Distress* does not make gender its central concern, and offers an all-encompassing utopian vision. However, gender is nonetheless a key theme, and the novel's portrayal of asexuality falls in line with the vision it drives towards. I would argue that both novels—despite the fact that nearly 30 years separate them, and which go about eliminating gender in two very different ways—are nonetheless comparable in that both attempt to postulate what such a society could be like. Both novels employ a gradual process of understanding on the part of the narrator to evoke a similar response in the reader. Le Guin's work takes "genderlessness" as its starting point, whereas Egan's novel takes a long detour through a multi-gendered society, sneaking a peek at several possible paths that eventually converge and reach the same end point.

Before the publication of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Ursula K. Le Guin's SF had amounted to five short stories and three novels. But while the first novels were rather traditional representatives of SF, the fourth was, as Donna R. White remarks, "something different" (1999, 45). Published in 1969, the novel went on to win both the Nebula and Hugo awards and become one of the most influential works of SF. In her book *Dancing with Dragons: Ursula K. Le Guin and the critics*, White overviews the enormous amount of critical attention Le Guin's work has received, and the dialogue she has engaged in with her critics. White devotes an entire chapter to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which in itself shows the novel's importance in Le Guin's oeuvre. Not only is it, "one of the three main foci" of Le Guin's work, but also, "one of the seminal texts of science fiction, as important and influential as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818)" (ibid., 46). *Left Hand* introduced two striking novelties to SF, one thematic, the other structural. Thematically, it offered a unique thought experiment in gender, imagining a society without sexual difference; structurally, it wove together first-person narratives (with varying narrators), journal entries, myths, and reports. The former novelty is, of course, intrinsically tied to the latter, as each of the novel's sections provides another layer for understanding of this society to the readers.

*The Left Hand of Darkness* follows the attempts of Genly Ai, a young black man from Earth, to convince the nations of Gethen, a planet in the midst of an ice age, to join the Ekumen—an organisation of planets that coordinates communication and trade between them. As is to be expected from people who had had no idea that aliens and other planets even exist, Gethenians respond to Genly with disbelief and even fear. Furthermore, his mission as an envoy is hindered by political intrigues in the two great Gethenian nations: one country, Karhide, is ruled by a paranoid king, while the other, Orgoreyn, is a totalitarian bureaucracy complete with a fearsome secret police, and international relations between the two are shaky. But what is arguably Genly's greatest obstacle is his own inaptitude. Born on Earth, Genly struggles to make sense of the Gethenian's unique biology, and its social implications. Gethenians are androgynous, or rather ambisexual, as they have the biological potential of both sexes but no fixed biological sex, and, as a corollary, no differentiation between sexes and no concept of gender. The novel provides key insights into Gethenian society on all levels through scientific reports and Gethenian folktales and myths, while a principal part centres on Genly's relationship with one Gethenian in particular, Estraven, who also narrates parts of the novel. In its entirety, the novel can be said to take the reader alongside Genly (even when it strays from his narration) as he gradually comes to understand what it means to be free from the constraints of binary gender differentiation.

The genderless society portrayed in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, while not a utopian one, does carry utopian implications, and the novel was one of two works that marked the beginning of the feminist utopias of the 1970s. The year of its publication, as Brian Attebery remarks, was the year that, "the feminist '70's may be said to have begun" (2002, 107). These feminist utopias emerged when utopian fiction was "generally considered a dead genre," having been replaced by dystopian fiction. The assumption implied thereby was that, "existing social systems, messy as they were, were better than anything that could come from social engineering" (Ibid.). But by the late 1960s feminists began to shake the foundations of this consensus as they started to wonder "better for whom?" (Ibid.). Utopian thinking, Anne K. Mellor writes, isn't only prophetic but also inherently critical (1982, 241), and is predicated on a dissatisfaction with things-as-they-are, combined with the hope that they can be bettered. By prophetic fiction, Mellor refers not to the portrayal of an inevitable future, but rather to envisioning a possible alternative. Feminist theory, Mellor argues, is inherently utopian in that it is, "grounded on the assumption of gender

equality, a social equality between the sexes which has never existed in the historical past” (Ibid., 243)

Mellor distinguishes between two types of utopian thinking: “abstract” and “concrete.” The former functions as “wish-fulfilment” and doesn’t offer any practical alternative, while the latter is a “critique of present society” that posits a viable future, and is therefore revolutionary in nature (242). But feminist utopian thinking, Mellor explains, “provides alternative models of sexually egalitarian societies” (243), whether abstract or concrete, since in both cases it defines the precise nature of a social ill—gender discrimination—and posits worlds in which that ill is, in one way or another, eliminated. Where feminist utopian thinking becomes concrete it “further offers potentially viable blue-prints for social organization” (243).

Feminist utopias, as Mellor illustrates, can be divided into three categories: “an all-female society, a society of biological androgynes, and a genuinely egalitarian two-sex society” (243). Works of the first category constitute the largest group of feminist utopias, but these single-sex utopias are limited and problematic in many respects, as both Mellor and Attebery point out. The most interesting point, I find, is the conclusion that single-sex utopias paradoxically end up “asserting a peculiar sort of continuity between gender” (Attebery 2002, 128) by redistributing differences, so that women alone turn out to be more like men (and vice versa). Thus, the meanings of each gender are altered, and most importantly “a possible overlap between them” (Ibid.) is revealed.

Delineating this overlap is exactly the purpose of Le Guin’s thought-experiment in androgyny. In her essay “Is Gender Necessary,” a public defence of her work, Le Guin enunciates her aims quite clearly: “I eliminated gender, to find out what was left. Whatever was left would be, presumably, simply human. It would define the area that is shared by men and women alike” (Le Guin 1993, 160). She did not consider her work, and SF in general, as an attempt at a blueprint for a possible future. Rather, according to the 1976 preface she added to *Left Hand*, she maintained that “science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive” (1976, 4), and that her attempt wasn’t meant to predict that humans will become androgynous or claim that they should be, but merely to observe that, in many respects, we already are. Even so, this observation is in keeping with Mellor’s definition of a feminist utopia. The androgyny of Gethenians is, essentially, a means of stripping away rigid gender categories, and in that respect I find it a desirable and possibly even viable option. Therefore, the question that remains to be answered is one that critics have argued over since the

publication of *The Left Hand of Darkness*: did Le Guin achieve her aim of eliminating gender, and, if so, what did she find in its place?

The most authoritative overview of Gethenian biology and society in the novel is found in the report of Investigator Ong Tot Oppong, a member of the first Ekumenical landing party on Gethen. In the chapter “The Question of Sex,” she explains that the Gethenian sexual cycle lasts around 26 to 28 days, during which they are sexually latent for 21 to 22 days. Hormonal changes beginning around the 18th day cause them to enter the period known as “kemmer” on the 22nd or 23rd day. At this stage, Gethenians experience an intense sexual impulse but remain androgynous and “incapable of coitus” (1969, 63) if kept alone. Once a partner is found, each of the partners will develop female or male genitals. However, Ong Tot Oppong stresses that, “normal individuals have no predisposition in either sexual role in kemmer; they do not know whether they will be the male or the female, and have no choice in the matter” (Ibid., 64). It would seem that Le Guin problematically conflates gender, sexuality, and biological sex, a point she later became aware of herself, noting, for instance, that she had neglected to explore the option of homosexuality in Gethenians (Le Guin 1993, 169). However, pointing out this elision and attempting to delineate each component separately are irrelevant in terms of Gethenian society, which does not have a system of gender differentiation, and to do so would be to apply our own set of presumptions. Thus, one cannot speak of homosexuality when one cannot speak of gender, and only of temporary hormonal and genital changes. Even if it were possible for two Gethenians to meet in kemmer while developing male genitals, it would not imply homosexuality as we understand it, but something altogether different.

Even more striking than the biological anomaly Ong Tot Oppong describes are its implications. Gethenian norms provide the necessary conditions for kemmer, complete with special monthly holidays and “kemmerhouses,” but on a day-to-day basis Gethenian society functions without sex, and without sexual differentiation. Any Gethenian can sire and bear children, which means that the, “burden and privilege are shared out pretty equally ... nobody here is quite so free as a free male anywhere else” (Le Guin 1969, 65). As Mellor concisely notes, “this effectively destroys the possibility of identifying sex-linked characteristics or roles” (1982, 252). Gethenian biology thus enables Le Guin to uproot the foundation of patriarchy by simply eliminating the polarising duality between men and women. Ong Tot Oppong continues to enumerate the positive implications of this society, making a direct address to the implied reader of the novel, asking them to consider a society predicated on an

entirely different basis than their own. A society in which there is no rape, in which, “there is no division of humanity into strong and weak halves, protective/protected, dominant/passive, owner/chattel, active/passive. In fact the whole tendency to dualism that pervades human thinking may be found to be lessened, or changed, on Winter” (Le Guin 1969, 66)

Ong Tot Oppong even ventures further and suggests that it may explain the fact that Gethenians, though known to commit individual acts of violence, have never waged war on one another. Though many other factors play a part in this (as yet) lack of large-scale organised violence, it is clear that Gethenians are much less prone to pursue progress and conquest. Gethenians, for whom it is always Year One, “feel that progress is less important than presence” (Le Guin 1969, 38). Presence is an important discipline of the Handdarata, the prevalent religion in Gethen (particularly in Karhide), which involves “self-loss ... through extreme sensual receptiveness and awareness” (Ibid., 43). Though it is noted that the Handdarata is a “religion without institution, without priests, without hierarchy, without vows, without creed” (41), it is nevertheless not without practices, disciplines, and philosophy. In her discussion of androgyny in *Left Hand*, Pamela J. Annas remarks that the Handdarata is, “concentrated in the ceremony of Foretelling ... based on a profound vision on transcendence through the weaving together of disparate elements” (1978, 151), which she demonstrates with the much-quoted Torner’s Lay, recited by Estraven to Genly at a crucial part of their journey: “Light is the left hand of darkness/ And darkness the right hand of light./ Two are one, life and death, lying/ together like lovers in kemmer,/ like hands joined together,/ like the end and the way” (Le Guin 1969, 153). Right before reciting these words, Estraven explains that the very fact that the Handdara (those who follow the way of the Handdarata) have no theory or dogma is a testimony to the Gethenian way of thinking, namely that they focus on likeness rather than difference.

This leads Genly Ai, like Ong Tot Oppong, to suggest that Gethenians are “as obsessed with wholeness as we are with dualism” (Ibid., 154). However, Estraven’s ensuing observation is that Gethenians, “are dualists too. Duality is an essential, isn’t it? So long as there is *myself* and *the other*” (154). This leads Estraven to ask Genly about the difference between the sexes, and the nature of women. According to Wendy Gay Pearson, this indicates that, “gender remains ... the root of difference,” so that the main difference in modes of thought between humans and Gethenians is, “constituted as an effect of sex/gender systems” (2007, 192). Even so, though Gethenians are just as keenly aware of differences