BIG ECHO
INTERVIEWS

2017–2020

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BIG ECHO
CRITICAL SF

bigecho.org

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Introduction

Big Echo, an online zine for critical or avant-garde SF, was founded during a pique of boredom in 2016 by myself and Paul Klassen—with me as editor and Paul as graphic designer. In those early days it was hard to drum up submissions so I started approaching writers whose work I loved to ask if they had any stories too offbeat for mainstream publication, or perhaps old pieces they'd be willing to toss our way. One of those writers was Rudy Rucker. With typical generosity he not only suggested a handful of possible candidates for republication, but proceeded to read everything we had previously run, as well as all of my own pseudonymous publications, before offering compliments, suggestions, criticisms and a fantastic précis of exactly what it was we were actually doing. He also gave us a celebrated name to wave in the face of anyone we might approach for favours in the future. I think it may have even been Rudy who first suggested doing interviews.

So for the next issue after the one in which we republished Rudy's story "Buzz," I contacted Bruce Sterling about the possibility of an interview ("Rudy Rucker described us as a semi-samizdat lit-crit zine!"), and after him Cory Doctorow ("Rudy Rucker described us as a semi-samizdat lit-crit zine!")—the recording of whose brilliant conversation I mangled so badly we are not including it—and then a great number of other writers and critics ("Rudy Rucker described us as a semi-samizdat lit-crit zine!") who had no incentive to give us their time and labour except for a sort of general sense of goodwill and the reassurance of Rudy's friendly thumbs-up.

We have organized those interviews here in the order in which they were published on the *Big Echo* website, more or less. I was the interviewer for all of them except Peter Milne Greiner's

conversation with Andrew Joron and Brendan C. Byrne's with M. John Harrison. As a result, many of them suffer from twin idiosyncrasies: the first is the warp of my own interests, preoccupations, and obsessions, which are perhaps niche, and the second is that many interviews were acquired for themed issues (Marxism, poetry, religion, alternative genealogies of SF, the avant-garde) and so might be skewed in bemusing ways.

We are incredibly grateful to all our interlocutors, it has been an unexpected and often bewildering joy to have the opportunity to interrogate so many artists and thinkers whom we admire. But we should say, given Rudy Rucker's early and continued encouragement of our fuck-it-let's-do-it enthusiasm, both this book and *Big Echo* altogether, could be characterized, for better or worse, as spawn of *Flurb*. Thanks, Rudy!

Robert G. Penner

Bruce Sterling

2017 October

Is it possible to write about the future without fetishizing technology?

If you don't put a capital "F" on it, yeah, it's possible to write about the future without trucking in the gizmos and hardware idols. Futurism is a big conceptual problem. It took until the 1600s for anybody to write any fictional narrative set "in the future." Before that, writings concerning the future were religious and prophetic. In the 1700s and 1800s they were commonly political stories of military invasion or utopian revolution. The hardware hangup didn't show up until the American SF of the 1920s.

If you look at what people choose to write on their tombstones, texts meant to be read by future generations, they're very fetishistic statements. Sepulchral, stern and solemn. Every once in a while you hear of a tombstone that's lighthearted, commonsensical, unpretentious and humane, but they're always outliers.

"The future is a kind of history that hasn't happened yet." Knowing that will help, but the writing of history is also quite "fetishistic." Our history fetishizes technology quite a lot nowadays. We'll talk about the "infrastructure" of the Roman Empire when the Romans never had such a term.

What would you describe as the ideological content of "the future" as an idea? Who owns it? Who controls it?

It's a cliche to claim that the people who control the past control the future, but to the extent that it's controlled at all, that's

pretty much the story-line. Confederate statuary is where it's at in "past-control" in the USA during 2017. If you study what's going on there now, it's a kissing-cousin to what most other troubled societies do with their statuary. Renaming streets, renaming towns, re-designing the currency, redesigning flags; I've spent a lot of time in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, so I've seen just a ton of this.

People may imagine that they own and control the future, but they get old. The future's where we go to die. We don't control that process.

You invite a comparison between the US and Eastern Europe. How do you see the differences in attitude to futurity or history in these two places?

One might wonder what's the big difference between futurity in the Balkans and futurity elsewhere. The distinction is that "the Balkans" isn't just one place, the Balkans is a "shatter belt." You can go ten kilometers in the Balkans and find a violently different historical narrative. In fact, you don't even have to move at all, because the secret of the Balkans is that people there are internally Balkanized. "Man, I really resent (ethnic group/religion/ideology), except for you, Mom." That's who they are.

Are you preoccupied with the failure of language?

Well, I do like neologisms and archaeologisms. You might say it's a "failure of language" when some forms of language vanish or lose semantic meaning, but I wouldn't say that I obsess about those "failures." I've got creative issues with language that are metaphysical. They're about the long-term relationships of language and time.

For instance: suppose it's 1947, and you tell your girlfriend, "I swear that I'll love you forever! So will you marry me?" And she replies, "That would be jake!" Then you get happily married and of course there's no "forever," because you both die 60 years later in 2007.

Okay, she gave you a reply with that slang word "jake," which sounded goofy and dated fast. But that wasn't any "failure" to fret about; that was a big success in human language use, because you were a cool young guy in 1947 who needed a jazzy hep-kitten who knew what was happening.

How would you characterize the theory or philosophy of time that underwrites so much of your work?

Metaphysically, it's the old question of how language maps reality. In my special case it's about "atemporality," or how language maps the changes in reality. What does language (or "media") have to do with what is truly new and what is truly old, or what is apparently futuristic and what is considered old-fashioned?

If your boyfriend asks you to marry him and share his future life, you might darkly reply with a "timeless" proverb from the Ancient Greek, such as "Call no man happy until he is dead." But "That would be jake!" is a better human response. It's more romantic, more enthusiastic, and also, it's a lot more forward-looking.

Is SF dead? Is all literature science fiction now?

People in American science fiction always worry about that. Personally, I've seen the behavior of small, vulnerable literatures in minor languages other than English. You see SF appear and die off quite a lot within those minor-language situations. Literature is always imperiled there.

SF tends to come back, though, whenever a workable niche appears. Something large and terrible happened to American SF when the pulp magazines disappeared during the paper rationing of the second world war. The pre-war fan culture was almost obliterated. The successor SF thing that revived post-war with cheap paperback novels, that wasn't the same as pulp SF.

We have a similar death-of-print cultural issue in the USA now. *Game of Thrones* as globalized digital video is a very different thing than the Ace doubles that George RR Martin used to praise in the 1970s.

Might you say a few words about science fiction as a "minor language?"

Of course no writer is keen to have their own language called "minor," but in the long run we're all "minor." Chaucer wrote in English and his Middle English is extinct. Also, science fiction isn't a "literature," it's a genre. At the moment, SF is a much bigger form of expression than Chaucer's long-form epic poetry. It's pretty hard to become a major poet in English nowadays, but if you're a contemporary poet in a "minor language," you can get a lot done that way.

You need a strategy to write work that matters to people. You can't just pity your own oppressed situation and think, "Oh well, I'm HG Wells, a weird, poor kid from a shabby background, so until universal justice arrives, I must be silent." Give your readers a break, they've got problems, too.

What has happened to the local? Is it still there? What does it mean? How should we be thinking about it?

That's a good, healthy, contemporary question for literature. People in all societies and languages have deep issues with the local and the global nowadays. Literature can be of profound use in grappling with that.

I've said for years that I wanted to write a "regional novel about the Planet Earth," but I don't think I'll ever do it. It's more of an aspiration that puts some calipers on the scale of the problem. The late Brian Aldiss once wrote a book of essays called *An Exile on Planet Earth*. That's a good SF approach to the peculiar nature of local and global. He was "Britain's Oldest Young Turk," Brian Aldiss, a smart, well-travelled guy with useful skills at paradox and oxymoron.

How would you characterize your political or ideological origins? How has your political trajectory changed over time? Would you characterize your project as revolutionary?

I've hung out with people who were revolutionaries. I can write pastiches of their rhetoric and I can even think politically, but in politics, I'm best "characterized" as a "fantasist."

I fantasize. I have no burning need for justice or high office. I don't want to govern the state. If I saw myself running for office, I would never vote for myself. I'd have a look at the curriculum vitae, and I'd say, "This guy's a fantasy writer. He's got no power coalition, no particular agenda, and no administrative skills."

If there's a "trajectory" there, it's that I've learned to think about people in politics with some empathy. Most politicians direly hunger for a slice of the public pie. They'll kill for power, they get killed for it. That's their duty maybe, it's their reason-of-state. I don't cruelly scold politicians all the time, because I pity them, or, to frame it in a way they would like much better, I have some solidarity with them. Their condition is tragic.

There is a religious tenor to a lot of your work, a hint of the medieval or apocalyptic, and you've used the phrase "never make a decision out of fear." Are you scared? If so, what of?

I can promise you I'm not scared of a medieval apocalypse.

People are mortal. I'm a guy from deep in the previous century. I've seen a lot of death among my intimates. I lost family when I was young. So I wouldn't state that I'm exactly "scared" about burying people who are dear to me, but grief is a fearsome matter. Every day is a gift. Life is frail and contingent. As a writer, that morbid awareness is a kind of blackwash on my stretched canvas. I wouldn't sketch out a Dance of Death every time I sit down to type, on the contrary I tend to be quite comic or even whimsical, but when you sense the "religious tenor" in my writing, that's probably what you see.

Mark Bould

2018 February

The central conceit of this issue of *Big Echo* is that *Capital* is a science fictional text. What are your thoughts?

Marx is constantly dipping his toe into the great midden of genre. He has a flair for fantastical gothic imagery: vampires and ghouls and topsy-turvy tables evolving grotesque ideas out of their wooden brains. But he also does SF. *Capital* describes workers as cyborgs, living appendages to overwhelming machines and systems that embody dead labor (capital) and extract and exhaust their living labor. Workers are reduced to zombified automata, mere components, like the factory hands in Lang's *Metropolis* or the cybraceros in Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer*. This cyborgization has tremendous liberatory potential *if*—and it's a monumentally big *if*—it can be detached from the bloodsucking economic logic of capital.

There are other ways we can think about *Capital* as science-fictional. To borrow Darko Suvin's troubled definition of SF, *Capital* is cognitively estranging: it presents a world that looks different to the one we commonly encounter, and prompts us to see our world very differently, to recognize a truth about it. This estranging effect is based in the cognition—the materialist rationality—that Suvin insists defines SF. But it is also based in a particular mode of persuasive rhetoric, as China Miéville's great rebuttal argues, pushing Suvin's logic until it breaks (it's in the essay at the end of our *Red Planets* collection).

Fredric Jameson, who hews closely to Suvin, describes one of SF's estrangement techniques as "world-reduction". Seen from a certain angle, though, he could as easily be talking about

Capital's method: "a principle of systematic exclusion, a kind of surgical excision of empirical reality, something like a process of ontological attenuation in which the sheer teeming multiplicity of what exists, of what we call reality, is deliberately thinned and weeded out through a process of radical abstraction and simplification."

But there are some kinds of SF Marx does not do. Beyond some passages in his agitational writings, such as *The Communist Manifesto*, he does not really extrapolate. He is immensely cagey—rightly so—about depicting futures. Which sometimes makes *Capital* read like the research underpinning the great unwritten "if this goes on" dystopian satire—like something Fred Pohl and Cyril Kornbluth might have written in the 1950s, or something weightier, quirkier and fucked-up, like *Limbo* by Bernard Wolfe (who was briefly Trotsky's bodyguard).

Better still, if you want to know what Marx's lost SF novel is like, read *Capital* and then look around you. This world is the logic of capital he outlined played out for another 150 years.

Cory Doctorow suggested in an interview with us that Marxism was inherently (even essentially) techno-utopian, that it sought social transformation through technological revolution. Would you agree with that position?

I'm curious to see how he makes his case, because summarized like that in a single sentence—and depending on your definitions of Marxism and of technology (and probably of utopianism, too)—it is clearly wrong. It is insufficiently dialectical, only part of the story.

Technology's ability to change the world is inseparable from questions of ownership. Marx recognized and often seems quite elated by the sheer power of capital—itself a technology—to muster resources, to overturn everything. Changing the mode of production transformed the world. Not just the technologies of extraction, production and distribution, but all the social relations in which they are embedded. But any exhilaration at capitalism sweeping away—more properly,

sublating—feudalism is always tempered by knowledge of its perpetuation of class conflict.

In 1920, Lenin said "communism is soviet power plus the electrification of the entire country." He made this claim at a very particular moment in a very specific debate at a precise historical conjuncture, but it articulates a more general point we should heed. Technology will not set us free. It is meaningless as a revolutionary tool without radical democracy. Whatever else it might be, the development, distribution and use of a technology is an exercise of class power. It is inscribed with contestation; it is a struggle for hegemony. And as my old mate Babyface—on guitar and polemic for Thee Faction—double-meaningly says: it's only class war if we fight back.

And if we think of systems of governance as technologies, we live in and under a massive crushing technology: the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. (By bourgeoisie, I don't mean those chattering impeccable fools sipping lattes from avocados in cereal cafés, with all their hygge and their shunting and their buy-to-rent dreams, but the capitalist class—itself increasingly a metonym for the algorithms of the global economy.) So then the dictatorship of the proletariat, which means radical democracy, is the kind of technology we should imbue with hope. Whether we are headed toward some kind of solarpunk fully automated luxury communism, or toward salvagepunk disaster communism. Or, being more sufficiently dialectical, toward some shifting, evolving, irresolvable passage between them—and between them and barbarism.

But there is nonetheless an often obsessive sort of thinginess in the genre?

Absolutely. One of the main phenomena SF negotiates is the encounter with otherness, whether with the immensity of the cosmos or with the colonial other or the gendered other. Edmund Burke argues that the sense of being overwhelmed by magnitude produces terror and awe, and—according to Immanuel Kant—those feelings stem from our sensory and

imaginative inability to grasp such enormity. Once we realize that it is beyond comprehension, we can place it in a conceptual category—the sublime—and thus dissipate its sense of threat and produce some frisson of pleasure. This is what is achieved on Wells's terminal beach, and in Stapledon's cataloguing of daughter species and aliens and cosmic cycles; it is central to spacefaring SF, both hard and space opera versions; and Lovecraft surfs its filthy backwash.

A similar incomprehension faces us when we encounter the otherness of another person, whose interiority is every bit as massive and complex as our own. And that interiority is not some isolated monadic soul. It is not the pristine individual, so beloved of liberalism and free market propagandists. It is intersocial, formed by and chaotically emerging from webs of interaction with human and non-human others. Interior and exterior, self and non-self, curve back on themselves like a Möbius strip. SF copes with the sublime magnitude of the other in various ways, from exterminate all the brutes to welcoming them into the Federation (though that might actually be the same thing). SF turns the other into a "neighbor," Emmanuel Levinas' term when he argues that rather than insisting on a shared universal identity we should accept and respect difference. However, as Slavoj Žižek points out in, I think, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, the concept of the neighbour draws the other into proximity to the self, into a shared identity, but leaves their otherness that we find so threatening intact to be modulated or mediated by this proximity. The "rape" scene in Gwyneth Jones's *White Queen* shows just how complex, how full of risk, this process can be, but does not reject it; the alternative might be far worse.

Now, our world is saturated by technology and by commodities, and—under capitalism—technology and the commodity are chiasmically entwined (the Möbius strip is a useful image here, too). Just as the commodity form has colonized the unconscious, so has technology form. They shape our imagination. And if the SF imaginary is dominated by technology, it always also carries the commodity inside it. (There is a really interesting, very specific example of this relationship in Spielberg's

Minority Report: the big-ass computer screen Tom Cruise stands in front of, controlling it with hand gestures, was designed by John Underkoffler as a "diegetic prototype" to demonstrate this proleptic technology to potential investors—and, among others, it was pursued by military contractor Raytheon, who are interested in developing battlefield data integration and analysis systems.)

But for all SF's obsessive thinginess, we are not really talking about objects. The things we are talking about are words, signs, representations. In his essay in *An American Utopia*, Fredric Jameson describes us as, faced with catastrophe, gathering commodities around us as kind of "objectal forcefield." And SF does the same with language. SF's words—its cyborgs and cyberpsaces, its FTL and anti-grav, its Ubik and Can-D and Chew-Z—shield us from the abyss.

Radhika Desai's essay on *Capital* at 150 (*Counterpunch*: "Marx's 'Capital' at 150: History in Capital, Capital in History," 2017) argues that its two most significant contributions were historicizing capitalism and giving us a method by which we can understand that history. Is that a fair reduction of the text? And to what extent is the SFnal project as much historical as futurological?

That's not a bad summary of *Capital*: a rigorous demonstration of the historical contingency and the inner driving logic of capitalism.

But of course, we have to remember that *Capital* is incomplete. It's as if Brandon Sanderson hadn't stepped in to finish off Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series. Or Brian Herbert and Kevin J Anderson hadn't blighted the world with prequels and sequels to the *Dune* series that Frank Herbert himself had long been ruining.

Nope, really can't think of an SF analogy to help your readers get a visceral sense of how significant *Capital's* unfinishedness is.

Michael A Lebowitz's *Beyond Capital: Marx's Political Economy of the Working Class* argues that Marx's failure to write the

planned volume on wage-labour skewed large parts of the subsequent Marxist/communist/socialist tradition—theoretically and practically—towards economic determinism, towards a damaging oversight of real human experience. (In Marx's defence, he didn't write it because he died.)

Kim Stanley Robinson argues that SF is a form of historical fiction—though perhaps what he means is that the best of certain kinds of historical fiction and science fiction are historicizing fictions. That is, they are concerned with—as Carl Freedman's *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* argues—articulating the dialectic of identity and difference, continuity and change. They map the relationships among individual agency, group and class agency, and the structural agency of economic, social and political systems. And this happens not just on the level of grand narrative sweeps. It is not just—as in Stan's great trilogy—about fashioning a Mars that is habitable in terms of breathable atmosphere and tolerable surface temperatures, and in terms of its economic, political and social relations. In SF, and perhaps in other forms of genuinely historicizing fiction, this happens on a word-by-word, sentence-by-sentence level, as Samuel R. Delany implies in his classic essay on SF language, "About 5,750 Words." And as Jameson argues when he dismisses the idea that SF extrapolation is about prediction, instead describing it as the juxtaposition and recombination of contradictory elements of the real world in "piquant montages." His example comes from a passage in Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* which throws high-tech and low-tech together in the same scene and the same sentence—medieval-ish stone masons using electric winches, strangely quiet trucks like barges on caterpillar tracks descending through the streets of the medieval-ish city. Such combinations disrupt those ridiculous old narrative of progress, of clearly defined and separate stages of development, which have done such good service for capitalism and empire and Empire.

Such passages also demonstrate SF's frequent obsession—whether knowingly or not—with uneven development. A great example of this is NK Jemisin's just-completed

Broken Earth trilogy, which also wrestles with anthropogenic climate destabilisation and climate refugees, resonates strongly with #BlackLivesMatter, and really troubles the distinction between SF and fantasy that Suvin and Jameson still sorta insist upon.

Might you say a few words about the coincidence of early SF with 19th century industrialization and the beginnings of global capitalism, which you briefly addressed in the intro to *Red Planets*.

Georg Lukács argued that the French Revolution, and the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, made history a mass experience for the first time and on a continental scale. The development of capitalism—colonial conquests, the enclosures of common land, the destruction of subsistence agriculture, industrialization, the scramble for Africa, and so on—adds massive weight to the change side of the continuity/change dialectic. These shocks, these transformation of daily life—captured so forcefully in *The Communist Manifesto*—affected huge numbers of people very directly, and was evident even to those cushioned from the worst of these wrenching dislocations. Andreas Malm's *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam-Power and the Roots of Global Warming* conveys this quite brilliantly while exploding the myth that in Britain water-power was replaced by steam/coal because the latter was cheaper and more efficient. In reality, steam won because the geographical specificity of water-power better enabled workers to protest the vampiric extraction of their living labor, to demand better wages and working conditions, to pressure mill owners to be responsible for the housing, health and education of workers and their families. Which was totally unacceptable to the capitalist class, so they took a gamble. That the cost of converting to coal/steam would enable them to reverse this impertinent tendency towards a slightly more equitable distribution of the wealth created by their workers. That it would ultimately be recouped by breaking nascent working class power and concentrating surplus value in their own grasping, ghoulish

claws. Because steam was not tied to specific locations in the same way, the capitalist class could make labor more precarious, depress wages to subsistence levels or less, and avoid any responsibility for the wellbeing of the workers enriching them. It is a fascinating story, and incidentally captures the magnitude and frequency of upheavals workers and their families endured so that their living labor could feed capital's vampire appetite.

At the same time, the global reach of capital and empire increased opportunities to encounter an array of otherness-es—sometimes directly, but mostly through varieties of media, entertainment and other commodities.

And with the often very visible role new technologies played in these historical transformations, SF or something like it kinda had to emerge. It could have—and did—take many different forms, and the SF we have today is a product of those unfolding contingencies.

Is it possible to write about the future without fetishizing technology?

Of course. There are all manner of feminist and green and post-apocalyptic SF stories set in societies where technology has been largely abandoned (Sally Miller Gearheart's *The Wanderground*) or put in its place (Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*) or lost for good (George Stewart's *Earth Abides*) or lost and recovered but with greater attention to the environment and ownership (the *Daymaker* trilogy by Gwyneth Jones writing as Ann Halam), and so on. But abandoning technology or cautiously renegotiating its role and place possibly fetishizes it just as much as does the drive to recover it (Leigh Brackett's *The Long Tomorrow*). The same contradiction is there in the Campbellian revolution in US pulp SF—show the reader lived-in future worlds with fabulous technology but make sure no one mentions the dilating doors. Such interplays of presence and absence, of substitution and denial, are the very stuff of fetishism.

So when technology is fetishized it typically functions to obscure commodity fetishism. Until you get a writer such as Philip

K Dick, whose technologies are always fetishized commodities and frequently also shove the cash-nexus in your face. His characters have awkward, argumentative social relationships with each other but also with fridges and apartment doors that demand payment before they will open. For William Gibson, too, encounters with technology are encounters with commodities: it is never just a cyberspace deck, it is an Ono-Sendai Cyberspace 7. But more generally cyberpunk rarely developed this awareness, rarely did more than reiterate the kind of ludicrous petit bourgeois commodity fetishism you find in Ian Fleming's hilariously snobbish James Bond novels (Which, incidentally, are great for teaching semiotics. Take a look at the opening paragraphs of chapter 25 of *From Russia with Love*. Man, could Fleming connote class spite, hatred of foreigners, contempt for women, terror at anything even marginally different from the little world he wished to inhabit—just by writing about the kind of knot used to tie a tie.)

Would you be willing to risk a comparative sketch of the ideological differences between contemporary UK and US science fiction writers?

Not really, no. Couldn't you ask me my favorite color? My ideal date? Okay. Here goes.

UK SF writers grasp the implications of thermodynamics, know that empires don't last and accept that their team is unlikely to win. US writers are at various stages of coming to terms with these truths, including denial. And this is why Britons are better than Americans at space opera.

US writers are more likely to think about intersectionality, UK writers to understand class as a key part of an intersectional identity. This is why the US has endless iterations of *Star Trek* and the UK has endless iterations of *Doctor Who* championed for their progressive politics even though they are both always already way behind the curve.

US writers are more likely to bear arms, UK writers to arm bears (well, badgers).

There are still arguments out there that pit SF that is analytical about class against SF that is analytical about gender and race. It is pretty easy, for example, to get white men to run their mouths about Marx for an issue like this; less so women and POC. Any thoughts?

White men will run their mouths off about anything. Just look at this interview.

Part of the reason lies in the left's long and complex history with women and people of colour. On the one hand you have CPUSA in the 1920s and 1930s at the forefront of white anti-racist struggle—the defense of the Scottsboro boys, and so on—and Marxism as a key element in the development of black radical thought and praxis, both then and in the 60s with DRUM and the Black Panthers. And on the other, you have swathes of the CPUSA stepping away from the struggle when Comintern changed its mind about strategy, and you have segregated unions and other failures. Or consider the impact of the New Left on second wave feminism: it gave many women a strong grounding in the praxis of organization and struggle, but was often so sexist that women left in droves to join overtly feminist organizations and struggles.

It is only in recent years that I've finally stopped regularly hearing that old bullshit about winning the class struggle first, that all these other problems—patriarchy, white supremacism, heteronormativity—are merely epiphenomena that will magically disappear after the revolution. Lizzie Borden's film *Born in Flames*—which got a beautiful 35mm restoration last year—is a brilliant response to such nonsense, and because it took five years to make it is inscribed with that vital transition from a primarily white, middle class, liberal second wave to the third wave feminism of working class women of color.

Some of these problems can be pinned on Marx, albeit unreasonably, for dying before writing that volume of *Capital* on wage-labor. In the three existing volumes, his modeling of the laws of capitalism requires him to us a rather abstract notion of the worker, a kind of black box proletarian, a figure without

subjectivity or material being. And Marxists have tended to carry on thinking of the worker in this way. But by Marx's own logic, the wage-labor volume would necessarily have had to rematerialize the worker, to acknowledge and think through the worker's full, rich, complex, intersectional, intersocial subjectivity.

Just as Marxists, socialists and trade unionists learned the importance in moments of struggle to unite under a singular identity—the proletariat, the workers of the world—so women, people of color, the colonized, LGBTQ people, people with disabilities and so on have also learned the importance of developing a strategic identity. To fight, to effect change, it is necessary to draw together people who have only some things in common under a temporary broad umbrella.

But it is easy to lose sight of the strategic nature of such an identity, to reify it and cling to it as *the* central part of one's identity, which is why so many on the left prioritized class to the exclusion of race, gender, sexuality, ability, and so on, and why so many focused on say race or gender typically neglect the others, including class analysis.

Or the strategic identity can come to feel oppressive because it lumps you together with many people who are in other ways very different, which can break and dissipate the shared identity.

Also, once certain goals are achieved, the dominant group within a broader identity often reverts to old patterns of discrimination against the people with whom it had been strategically advantageous to share an identity. For examples, I'll have to crudely compress some complex histories; these are very broad strokes. Look at how central a role women, minority ethnic groups and rural populations played in anti-colonial struggles, subsuming themselves within the identity of the nation-to-come, and look at how frequently an urban, male, majority ethnic group on winning power returned them to the margins. In the UK, the horrible resurgence of a racism that never really went away was made just that little bit easier by the (in many ways understandable and necessary) disaggregation into its component parts of the Black British identity which in the 1960s and 1970s united Britain's Asian, Afro-Caribbean and

African populations in a strategically shared struggle against racism. In the US, the emergence of Reaganite, consumerist postfeminism can be seen as conservative white middle class women, beneficiaries of a second wave in which they may or may not have participated, running scared at the sight of the next wave composed of third world feminists and working class women of color—of their maids and nannies and cleaners. And so on.

What are the most exciting developments in contemporary SF writing over the last twenty years? How do you see it proceeding?

The destabilisation of it all. By two or three interrelated developments since the late 1990s which I think will shape SF in complex, sometimes utterly unpredictable, ways for the next decade or more.

Genre boundaries are no longer as fixed as they seemed—I mean, they were never stable, and to think otherwise is delusional—but with the emergence of the new weird, interstitial, post-genre generation(s) a long bubbling transformation began to take hold. When China Miéville called the new weird "post-Seattle fiction," he really captured how this was not just some dry exercise in anatomy and classification, but part of wider social and political changes.

Back then, China was using "new weird" to talk about how it was suddenly quite natural for his generation to mash-up and recombine genres (rather than about the more specific strand of weird fiction that was only just becoming visible in work by Jeff VanderMeer, Michael Cisco, KJ Bishop, Steph Swainston, and others). Looking back, it is now obvious how important writers of color, many of them women, have been to that genre-recombination: Nalo Hopkinson, Nnedi Okorafor, NK Jemisin, Andrea Hairston and Nisi Shawl. In the UK right now, Tade Thompson is scuffing up genres like they're old Doc Martens.

Alongside this, and not unrelated, there is a fresh wave of afrofuturism, the rise of Indigenous futurism, Latinxfuturism and Chican@futurism, loads more queer SF, fiction by writers

with disabilities and by writers thinking critically about ability/disability as a social and material construction.

Also, there has been a massive growth and/or increased visibility and presence of SF from Africa (check out omenana.com), from Asia (start with mithilareview.com), and Latin America (Argentina's Carlos Orsi, Gustavo Bondoni and Teresa de Mira Echeverria, Brazil's Fabio Fernandes and Jacques Barcia, Cuba's Yoss, and many more).

So much of the exciting stuff, and the good stuff, is coming from creators who historically have been marginalized by white supremacist, patriarchal, heteronormative, ableist, first world, Anglophone SF. But now, its dominant (and still depressingly strong) norms are not just being challenged; they're being historicized. Which is why we are suffering all that puppy nonsense, with its bogus identity politics and unfathomable sense of victimhood, its absurd fantasy of liberals as big fascist meanies, and its genuinely confusing notion that it is insulting to accuse someone of fighting for social justice. And which is why I spend so much time in boring meetings rehearsing in my head terms like cisfuturism, honkyfuturism, gavachofuturism and Waščufuturism, looking forward to a time when we will look back and realize we need a new vocabulary to tell SF's story very differently.

What do you see as the unspoken ideological assumptions that currently shape the genre?

The genre articulates, mediates, reproduces the ideological field in which it participates. So it is still predominantly unthinkingly straight, ableist, patriarchal, white supremacist, capitalist, extractive, anthropocentric, and so on. Look at the fiction dealing directly and indirectly with anthropogenic climate destabilization, for example, and these fault lines run right through it. You can see them in the fantasies of mitigation, prevention or reversal, just as much as in the fantasies of running away from it all and leaving everyone else to rot.

But as always there is a struggle for hegemony, so any individual text is going to articulate a conflicted, contradictory

position among all those tensions and tendencies. What is exciting about this moment is that we are embroiled in a making-visible of struggle. This is why RaceFail '09 was so important: for once, the other side got called on its shit; for once, we had to stop and check whether we were on the other side, the ones who needed to be called on our shit; for once, we had to check whether our shit was the shit that people needed to be called on. And just because in the grand scheme of things it might look like a storm in a teacup does not make it not significant, does not make it not matter.

What is the role of a critical theorist like you in relation to all this?

By day, I am paid by a public university deeply embroiled—as are they all—in the neoliberal project of transforming everything into a source of private profit. And although public universities cannot themselves make a profit, they are machines for redistributing public money away from the public: through outsourcing services, undertaking massive (and often vanity) construction projects, and especially through the creation of student debt. (The UK now has the most expensive public universities in the world. In addition to turning education from an open-ended public good into an individual consumer choice, the current loans-and-fees regime is so poorly designed that it costs the taxpayer more than the grants-based free education it replaced. But this might be a feature rather than a bug since, ultimately, it too turns public money into private profit.) By day, I produce educated workers, who swell the ranks of the reserve army of labor, further enabling the massive suppression of wages which has been going on in the west since the 1970s. By day, I do administrative work, an ever-growing proportion of which is what David Graeber calls bullshit work—and it is work that administrators used to do, back before we all began to feel precarious all the time and lost the ability to resist the ongoing destruction of something as fundamentally important as education.

However, my role as a critical-theorist is to critique, challenge

and resist such logics. And fortunately, my day job is also about engaging—critically, creatively, imaginatively, affectively, intellectually, politically—with students, and doing so in ways that respect and nurture them rather than interpellate them as "customers." As with my writing, it is about questioning the texts and artifacts that make up so much of our quotidian experience. It is about building our capacities for critique and praxis (though late on a Thursday afternoon after six hours of classes, or midway through a journal article, it might not always look much like that). It is about telling stories about stories that are hopefully as compelling—albeit in different ways—as the stories I am telling stories about. It is about telling stories that might help to make the world a less terrible place, might help us all move towards the radical social, political and economic changes we so urgently need. And about connecting this activity to other kinds of collective action in the world. Culture is just one part of the battle.

Ken MacLeod

2018 February

The central conceit of this issue of *Big Echo* is that *Capital* is a science fictional text. If you have any immediate thoughts on that (good idea, bad idea, obvious idea, stupid idea) we'd love to know them.

I have to begin by admitting that I've never studied *Capital*. I read Volume One in the old Charles H Kerr edition way back in the 1970s, and I've read a few introductory texts on Marx's economic theories and on "Marxist economics," of which the one that sticks is Ernest Mandel's *Introduction to Marxist Economic Theory*, a masterpiece of concision and clarity. The most comprehensive introduction to *Capital* as a whole that I've read is *Marx's Capital*, by Ben Fine and Alfredo Saad-Filho. The main lesson I got from it was that you really have to read Volumes Two and Three as well, and a sense of the instability and contingency of the system's circuits.

It must have been some earlier reading around Volumes Two and Three that inspired a throwaway line or two in my fourth novel, *The Sky Road*: "he'd run refinements of Otoh's neo-Marxian reproduction schemata, primed with empirical data, on the university's computers [...] the sinister algebra of the Otoh equations added up to complete breakdown in two more business-cycles. [...] That had been one boom and one slump ago."

Sinister algebra! Now there's a science fictional use of *Capital*!

For me, the most SFnal text of Marx is the *Grundrisse*, which consists of Marx's notes when he was working out the ideas that went into *Capital*. In the *Grundrisse* he speculates on taking the

tendencies within capitalism to their extreme limit, so you have a fully automated machinery of production. He doesn't expect that to happen, because there are countervailing tendencies, and so on. But as a reductio ad absurdum of one tendency of the system, it bites. And it holds out the prospect of a world of creativity and abundance beyond capitalism. When it came to writing *Capital* Marx was more cautious, but out of that caution came one of the most singing passages of the work:

> In fact, the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production. Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilised man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but, at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase. Freedom in this field can only consist in socialised man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working-day is its basic prerequisite. (*Capital, Vol. III*, 1959)

It strikes me that here Marx unites the hopes that inspired all the great humanist thinkers with the everyday class struggle—organised or not—over working time. We shouldn't overlook what a gigantic advance this was in human self-understanding.

Aristotle could imagine the all-round development of the human being—heck, he could *see* it, in Athens at its best—but he couldn't imagine it as a possibility for everyone. Most human beings were doomed to be instruments of labour to enable the leisure of a few. And at the other end of this history, where liberal humanism is just beginning to tip over into socialism, you find John Stuart Mill's chapter on "The Probable Futurity of the Labouring Classes" where he expects workers' co-operatives to become the dominant form of production and to end this class division between the toiling many and the fulfilled few. But it took Marx and Engels to ground all this in the mundane realities of political parties and trade unions, as August Nimtz has shown.

The only sense in which Marxism is techno-utopian is that it recognises that a society without class division and at the same time with the possibility of further human development can only come about on the basis of advanced machinery that enables a vast increase in available leisure time for the great majority. (It's true that you can get local instances of communism at a very low level of technology, as seems to have happened in ancient Anatolia after an actual, dateable uprising of the lower orders, and they can last for thousands of years and be from all the evidence free and peaceful and happy places, but they have no possibility of further development.) This perspective has often been summarised as "Athens with machines instead of slaves." But I wouldn't say Marxism seeks positive social transformation through technological revolution: more that it seeks a positive use of technology through social revolution. There's nothing automatic about automation bringing utopia, far from it. As Mandel says in the pamphlet I mentioned, the system "will never die automatically. It will always be necessary to give it a conscious little push to effect its demise, and it is our job, the job of the working-class movement, to do the pushing." (*An Introduction to Marxist Economic Theory*, 1967)

Now you can agree or disagree with Mandel on the desirability or probability of that conscious little push but there is no doubt that this is the view taken by Marx in *Capital*, even down to the sense of an almost modest task being posed—that what it would

take to end capitalism would be incomparably less violent and protracted than what it took to establish it.

There is a short essay on *Capital* at 150 by Radhika Desai in which she argued that the two most significant contributions of the book were that it historicizes capitalism and gives us a method by which we can understand that history. Is this a fair reduction of *Capital's* significance? And in your experience to what extent is the SFnal project also, or at least potentially, such a historical project?

I have to thank you for that link because besides being a stimulating essay it sent me back not only to Volume One but to Ernest Mandel's introduction. I've learned a lot over many years from reading Mandel, and I have a lot of respect for his memory. I whole-heartedly agree with Desai's recommendation of Mandel's introduction and her urging of people not to be intimidated by *Capital* or get side-tracked into rival interpretations but to read it for themselves. However, as I say it's a long time since I read the book myself, so I'm not entirely sure about whether that's a fair reduction, but I would agree that enabling us to see capitalism as a social system that had a beginning, that has a development, and that has a foreseeable end is one of *Capital*'s major accomplishments.

On the second question, I've argued elsewhere that science fiction is implicitly historical materialist:

> What distinguishes SF from previous ways of thinking about the future is precisely what distinguishes Marxism from other forms of socialism - it investigates the possibilities of the future by looking at the tendencies of the present: developments in technology, scientific discoveries, social trends, and how these interact. A reading of science fiction is one of the best possible preparations for understanding Marx's materialist conception of history, no matter how conservative or pro-capitalist the given writer's own views may be. That society is greatly affected

> by technological change, that societies flourish or fail to the extent that they enhance or inhibit technological progress, that people's philosophical and religious and moral ideas are connected to the whole social system in which they live and move and have their being, and that the whole social system itself rests upon the ability of human beings to wrest a living from nature - these ideas are the most basic tools in the science-fiction writer's kit, and in the science-fiction reader's mental map of the world. They are also, of course, those of Marx. (*The True Knowledge of Ken MacLeod*: "Socialism: Millenarian, Utopian, and Science-Fictional," 2003)

This may have been a tad over-stated, especially as I went on to suggest that maybe because the First and Second Internationals actually did promulgate that materialist way of thinking it may have directly or indirectly influenced early SF. But I still think tracing these connections would make an interesting research project for someone someday.

How would you characterize your political or ideological origins? How has your political trajectory changed over time? Would you characterize your project as revolutionary?

I began to think about politics when I was in secondary school, around about 1970. I caught the tail end of the 60s radicalization and read about Malcolm X and May 68 and Women's Lib and Northern Ireland and, well, everything! This was a time of great questioning and upheaval. After I moved to London in 1976 to attempt a research degree in biomechanics at Brunel University I joined the International Marxist Group, the British section of the Fourth International. We were relentlessly active: in West London we were involved in the labour movement, anti-racist and anti-fascist actions, the Troops out Movement, the women's movement and later CND and the Labour left. Within months of joining I was smuggling books into Czechoslovakia—a mission for which I received no practical training or political preparation

whatsoever. By 1980 or so I was getting pretty frazzled, went through some wild political lurches and eventually concluded that Trotskyism was fundamentally misguided. After giving things a lot of thought I joined the Communist Party in the mid 1980s just as it began to tear itself to bits and just as Chernenko gave way to Gorbachev and it all started kicking off in the East. I followed the ensuing counter-revolution quite intensely. At first I indulged some hopes that this was the political revolution for workers' democracy that Trotsky had talked about, but soon saw that this notion was deluded. Unfortunately the delusion was held onto by most of the far left, including Mandel.

All this while I had been reading widely, and talking to lots of different people, and I was well versed in the critiques of existing socialism from the right and from the left. So none of this came as a great surprise or shock, but it certainly showed that the two political currents I had tried to swim in—Trotskyism and mainstream Communism—had run into the sand. Those left currents that weren't implicated in the debacle—from anarchism and left-communism to conventional right-wing social democracy—had proved themselves incapable of so much as intervening in the crisis of state socialism, let alone gaining from it. The fall of Communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was far more than the well-deserved eviction of their complacent and insolent state and party apparats. The entire Left was hammered for the foreseeable future.

My first four novels, the Fall Revolution books, came out of thinking over this defeat and thinking through some consequences of it. There's a thread in the first two about the problems of markets and planning, which I'd been obsessed with ever since the mid-1980s. The idea that unacknowledged planning is as crucial to modern capitalism as unofficial and often illegal trading was to the Soviet economy—called in the novels "black planning" by analogy to the "black market"—came from reading Hillel Ticktin and others of the *Critique* school, which I first encountered at Glasgow University back in the 1970s. The Fall Revolution books were written in the 1990s and the flames of Yugoslavia and the first Gulf War were very much on my mind. I had

found that some libertarians, whose critiques of socialism I had been reading since the early 1980s and with whom I had some agreements and disagreements, were more implacably opposed to wars of intervention than much of the liberal left. I became a daily reader of Antiwar.com, as I remain. Those first four books are riddled with allusions to the Fourth International and to free-market libertarianism. As a result a lot of people think I'm either a Trotskyist or a Libertarian. Well, I'm not!

After I had worked all that out of my system I felt free to explore other ideas and possibilities. For instance, in *Learning the World* I take the hypothesis that the old Victorian liberals like Spencer and Macaulay were right after all, and capitalism will last and improve for tens of thousands of years. In *The Restoration Game* I wondered if the conspiracy I was in when I crossed that border in that van was rather more extensive and successful than it seemed at the time. But in most of my books the future, near or far, is set in one stage or other of a rocky passage out of capitalism. Even if sometimes the rocks seem to have blocked it completely, as in *Intrusion*:

> "It's banal," Ahmed said. "'Delay is the essence of the period,' as Ticktin said." He shrugged. "Sorry. It's as simple as that."
>
> Geena shook her head. "I don't get it."
>
> "The global system has got to the stage where the whole show can only be kept on the road consciously. And for that it needs all the critique it can get."
>
> ....
>
> "What alternative, then?"
>
> "The one that's implicit in the system itself."
>
> "Oh." Geena felt disappointed. "*Socialism*. Like anybody would ever want *that*."
>
> "Well, indeed," said Ahmed, in a wry tone. "It would be so terrible that the most important task in politics has become preventing people from realising that they're already almost there. That train has left the station. We've already crossed the border. State-capitalism can flip over—or rather,

> can be flipped over, overturned—into socialism in the blink of an eye, the moment people become conscious of the possibility. The point is to *prevent* them becoming conscious."

What I hope is consistent throughout is at the very least an anti-imperialist and antiwar standpoint, and libertarian (in the broad sense) attitude. And to remind people of the possibility of that little conscious push.

Apart from that, though, I wouldn't characterise my project as revolutionary. It would be pretentious, for one thing, and ridiculous, for another. As you may have gathered, I was absolutely crap at being a revolutionary. I'm quite content to be a member of the Labour Party. What I try to do, in non-fiction writing and speaking as well as science fiction, is to encourage a certain way of thinking about the present and the future. In a talk on space and socialism that I was asked to give in Manchester a few years ago I put it like this: "[T]here's a civilisational crisis, a complex of conflicts that have to be resolved in, let's say, the coming century if we are to continue in something like a civilised manner. But we are part of the working class, the class that can outlive capitalism. Which means it's up to us to make our way to a future beyond it. That's the weight of the responsibility we've taken on."

Is it possible to write about the future without fetishizing technology?

Yes, of course. But "fetishizing" is ambiguous. There's the psychoanalytic sense of eroticising an inanimate object, which in this context could mean shiny things and phallic spacecraft. There are a lot of cheap laughs to be got out of that, no doubt. And then there's the sense used in *Capital*, which as I understand it means attributing agency and relationships to things, so that the market becomes in a double sense a second nature.

These two usages get persistently muddled in lazy discourse, as if what Marx meant by "the fetishism of the commodity" was somebody stroking their new phone or giving their car a

name. By analogy with the Marxian sense of the term, fetishizing technology would be attributing to it a degree of autonomy and inevitability that it doesn't have. The idea of the Singularity, particularly as projected by the likes of Ray Kurzweil, does that a lot. As if the only sure generalisation in social science was Moore's Law!

And a similar fetishization occurs in pop futurology and in the mass media. In science fiction itself it's, if not rare, then something that would have to be established case by case. Science fiction has always been about causality and consequences, and often second or third order consequence.

What might be a more pervasive problem is that way that science fiction unconsciously participates in the hype cycle of emergent technologies—what I've heard referred to by a sociologist of science as "the political economy of promise." There's another research project there, if anyone's interested. I think it was Kim Stanley Robinson who first pointed out that when science fiction was ostensibly all about spaceflight what was really going on was a massive expansion of aviation. Cyberpunk caught on in the late 1980s just as computers began to land on office desks but before the Internet had become an everyday reality. And it helped to bring that about. Maybe New Space Opera and New Hard SF presaged the much more private and profit-driven space programmes of today, as well as the more realistic approach to space exploration—lots of little robots, rather than astronauts—and maybe something similar is happening or about to happen with biotech.

What would you describe as the ideological content of "the future" as an idea? Who owns it? Who controls it?

We're seeing the truth of the slogan from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: "Who controls the past controls the future." Every possibility of making a better world through conscious collective action is seen as utterly discredited in practice. The past is trashed, the future is vacant and dystopia is the default. Changing this will depend on a real revival of consciousness that the world can be changed.

Around about 2011 I was walking to the station in Amsterdam, and happened upon a huddle of tents that turned out to be Occupy Amsterdam. Slavoj Zizek was wandering around being interviewed by a group of young people. I overheard him say very emphatically: "We have to admit that the Twentieth Century was a *disaster*." It wasn't my place to interrupt but I felt like heckling him. We have to admit no such thing. A billion people went into the Twentieth Century and for all the wars and revolutions, six billion people came out of it. And far healthier, longer-lived, more literate and freer people, at that. If you dismiss that you sell the past to the one per cent right away.

My whole view of what science fiction was and could do was shifted on its axis by a talk at the Edinburgh International Book Festival a couple of years ago by Mary Talbot and Brian Talbot. They were introducing their graphic non-fiction book about the revolutionary and Communard Louise Michel, *The Red Virgin and the Vision of Utopia*. They showed that science fiction and technological utopianism were very much a part of a radical popular culture of opposition among the turbulent people of Paris in the 1860s, the people who went on to establish the Commune. This is quite a different origin story of the genre and its readership from what we usually trace through the American pulps.

And I suspect that the future as an idea looks very different in China and the newly industrializing countries than it does in Europe and North America, but that's a question I intend to investigate further in the actual future, if we're spared.

There are still arguments out there that pit SF that is analytical about class against SF that is analytical about gender and race. Any thoughts?

My first thought is that this is literally a first world problem. Most of the world's Marxists are in Asia! And nearly all of the rest are in Africa and Latin America. Maybe the real problem is with SF fans and writers, rather than with Marxism? But more seriously, from the outside it seems that particularly in the

United States a ludicrous and pernicious misunderstanding has been cultivated that Marxism is all about class, and that what Marx meant by the working class is white men who work in factories. So socialism is seen as privileging the so-called white working class, and in competition with or even opposition to struggles against other forms of oppression. As this misconception is promoted quite widely including by many leftists and liberals, it's not surprising that it has an effect. But its real basis is the deep divisions in US society and the weakness of the left, which the misconception serves to perpetuate, along with the destruction of its historical memory, so it's all a nightmare spiral to which I have no easy answers.

What would you characterize as the most exciting developments in contemporary SF writing over the last twenty years? How do you see it proceeding over the next few?

The awful truth is that I'm twenty years behind in reading contemporary SF. It's an occupational hazard of writing it, at least if you're as lazy and easily distracted as I am. I read far, far more non-fiction than fiction of any kind. I can look with some pride at a dozen Gollancz SF Masterworks that I've written well-received introductions to, all lined up on one bookshelf, and I can look at adjacent shelves and see major recent works by writers I admire, some of whom I know, and I could just curl up in shame that I have yet to read them. And on another shelf, there are those unopened Volumes Two and Three of *Capital*...

Does the style of your work (or SF more generally) correlate to political and ideological shifts?

Bearing in mind what I just said about being twenty years behind current SF ... it's a tricky one. At first glance it seems like there's a very rough correlation between political conservatism and readable or popular style—but it's more complicated than that. I think the key variable is the personal impact of literary movements in SF: the New Wave confronted the issues of style,

texture, literary experiment and innovation, and didn't for the most part care about commercial or popular success. That approach, taken in the UK by *New Worlds*, had a resurgence in the New Weird, with M. John Harrison as a strong and articulate voice in both.

Since 2008 the commercial pressures on all genre writers have become a lot more pressing. And in the past few years there was a convulsive reactionary movement in SF, the whole Sad/Rabid Puppies brouhaha, which attempted to equate right-wing politics with readable style and liberal or left-wing, so-called SJW politics with literary pretension and obscurity. This is of course a classic right-wing populist ploy, and one that falls apart on examination.

The implied template of good old-fashioned SF style goes back to Campbell's exaltation of so-called transparent, workmanlike prose, as exemplified by Heinlein and Asimov—and analysing Heinlein's politics, or even Asimov's, would take some serious work (as it has in Heinlein's case, most recently in Farah Mendlesohn's new book). This *Analog* aesthetic is carried forward by Niven and Pournelle and the whole libertarian mil-SF tradition, where it sometimes devolves into pure pulp. Because the New Wave reacted against the Campbellian old guard, and because some but by no means all its writers were broadly speaking on the left, you can see where the rough correlation comes from.

But then you see the exceptions, and the complications of any simple mapping. Lovecraft had a—well, distinctive, let's say—style. Gene Wolfe is a conservative, and his style is perhaps the most literary—and literate—in the field, putting considerable demands on the reader. Likewise Disch, and Keith Roberts, an increasingly self-conscious and accomplished stylist as time went on. Among writers you could categorise as liberal or progressive, Le Guin's prose is clear and popular, as is Bujold's. And Brin, Scalzi, Stross, Kowal, Robinson and so on.

In my own work there's a definite move to a simpler style, and it's not entirely driven by market considerations. In *The Star Fraction* there are, I'm afraid, some purple passages, some

too-clever word-play, turns of phrase I was proud of—always a warning sign. But this arose out of my clumsy emulation of elaborate style done well, notably in the early work of M. John Harrison which was all I'd read of him at the time. I'd been enthralled by the prose of *The Pastel City* and *The Centauri Device* and the great short stories such as "Running Down" and "Coming from Behind," and thought I could try for that effect. No go.

And there was another fault too, which my striven-for style tended to hide. I showed a draft of the second chapter of my second novel to Andrew Greig, a poet and novelist I'd met when he was Writer in Residence at Edinburgh University. He went through a couple of pages with a sharp pencil and taught me line editing. He called it "picking the fluff off the needle." I'm convinced this is something you have to be shown by someone else, and once you've seen it done you can do it for yourself—a favour I've paid forward more than once. As time has gone on the style I've striven for is that of good commercial fiction, a more difficult standard than some might suppose.

Is there a tendency in SF to valorize technocracy and theoretical knowledge at the expense of social movements, to suggest that change is driven by small groups or individuals in possession of esoteric knowledge? (If one was a total ass one could ask: If Marxism was SF, would cyberpunk be Leninist?)

I get the joke, but—to ruin it with pedantry—the idea of an elite with esoteric knowledge has nothing to do with Lenin, whatever you may say about certain self-styled Leninists. The historian Lars Lih has established this pretty conclusively, as did the American socialist Hal Draper many years ago. Lenin thought Marxism was a social science that like any science took serious effort to learn, but the whole point was to bring that body of knowledge to as many working people as possible, and to convince them to act on it. There was nothing esoteric about it.

But in SF the tendency you mention is ever-present, and I have to put my hands up to that too. As some readers and critics have

remarked, in the Fall Revolution books the whole fate of humanity and long-term future of the universe is determined by four people who drank in the same student union bar in Glasgow in the 1970s. Two different futures, come to think of it, that in *The Sky Road* hinge apart on one moment of decision by one character. And because this character is herself a historical materialist, she worries about that!

In part this tendency is a necessity for fiction. You can't have story without character, decision, agency and consequence. Because in SF the consequences are often global, and the protagonists are so often people with technical or scientific or otherwise important knowledge, the whole problem stands out sharply. And there is a difficulty in having a social movement as a protagonist. I think Kim Stanley Robinson achieves it in the Mars trilogy, but even there the First Hundred and their personal quarrels and affairs and so on play a big part in the plot. But to turn the question back on itself, China Miéville's *October* writes an accurate history of the Russian Revolution almost as if it was science fiction—like an alternate history that actually happened, which is how it strikes us now—and achieves a vivid depiction of a gigantic social upheaval without losing sight of agency and decision at every level of the process.

This idea of different origin stories for SF, of alternate genealogies, is very much in the air, and I wonder what the most significant non-SF influences on your SF might have been.

In this interview we've focussed on Marxism, and while my acquaintance with that and my very marginal participation in political and social struggles has obviously been an influence, it's far from the only one and perhaps not the major one. Most of what goes into my SF is what I've squirreled away from science and philosophy and history and following the news. For my latest trilogy, *The Corporation Wars*, I drew on a lot of online reading about neo-Reaction, and on realising that I'd met its ancestors in the trenches of 1990s Usenet, and on reading a little book about planetary science (*Planets: A Very Short Introduction*,

by David A. Rothery) over and over. Or at least taking it out from the library over and over.

The Scottish landscape has been important to me, as have other landscapes and locations I've visited. Poetry and music, to an extent, though my tastes are barely educated. My experience of working in science and later in IT and industry obviously goes into many of my books, as well as a later wider interaction with literary people and academics.

For example, I shared with Pippa Goldschmidt a residency for a year or so at the Genomics Policy and Research Forum at Edinburgh University. The Forum was a node for public engagement with the results of social science as applied to the new life sciences, using everything from policy briefings and press packs to plays and art installations. For the first time I saw the social sciences from the inside, an experience I drew on and mildly satirised for the novel I wrote during that residency, *Intrusion*.

We put on events that brought together scientists, social scientists, writers and journalists for informal discussions, with titles like "The Laboratory of Dr Latour, and other stories," on the scientist in fiction and in science studies; or "Dr Jekyll's DNA Found: Is Hyde in the clear?" on genetics and crime, featuring crime writers Ian Rankin and Lyn Anderson. We did one on science and poetry, "Base Pairs and Couplets," with a panel of well-known poets. And we found that SF fandom networks are a great force multiplier for public engagement with science.

An alternative genealogy, perhaps, of my own SF implicates the seamy underside of a great deal of SF—pseudoscience. I was raised in what is now called young earth creationism, and by reaction as a teenager I got hooked by von Daniken and Velikovsky and UFOlogy, and by a further reaction and a little education got into scepticism, rationalism and secular humanism in my later teens and twenties. That, by extension rather than reaction this time, led on to an interest in computation and evolution and later on to deep time and geology.

This is all very close to the Brit-SF genealogy. After Mary Shelley's brilliant start we can trace its prehistory in scientific romance and future war stories, then spot its point mutation

of origin as a distinct species with H. G. Wells learning zoology from Thomas Huxley. That puts Wells, Stapledon, Clarke, Baxter and all who met them only so many handshakes away from Darwin: an apostolic succession for the church of science militant. And there are connections between that tradition and the British radical scientists: Haldane, Hogben, Levy, Needham, Bernal. Off the top of my head I know that Wells blurbs Hogben, Clarke cites Haldane and Bernal. The founding SFnal text of Brit-SF is *The Origin of Species*. But to understand this particular peculiarity of the English, you could do worse than start by reading the historical chapters of *Capital*.

Marge Piercy

2018 February

From your historical novels, particularly the French Revolution in *City of Darkness, City of Light*, through the '60s and '70s of *Vida* and other contemporary works, and into your more purely speculative novels, you have pursued overtly political, even radical and revolutionary themes across time and genre. In *He, She and It* you've even integrated an account of early modern Europe into the science fiction narrative. Is there a particular philosophy of time that underlies your storytelling? What is the relationship of past, present and future in your work?

I am very interested in how we got where we are. I've always felt that in order to change things, you have to understand the forces and choices that created the PRESENT, therefore I write about times in the past that I find very relevant. You didn't mention *Sex Wars* but that falls under the same rubric as *City of Darkness, City of Light* and *Gone to Soldiers* and the historic parts of *He, She and It*. I'm especially interested in those times that I feel made changes in direction or tried to.

In relation to periods of change and revolution, I'm wondering where you would locate the origins of those shifts; is it in mass movements and global exchanges? Or in local situations, face to face relations?

Grassroots organizing is always very important, but if there isn't a mass movement, nothing changes. The powers that be always push back, so an ongoing struggle can't work from isolated groups.

In one of our interviews for this issue, Cory Doctorow suggested that Marxism was inherently techno-utopian, that it sought social transformation through technological revolution. Would you agree with that position?

I don't see that. And Marxism has many different strands. There is no monolithic Marxism. Think of all the splinter groups on the Left at any given time.

Is it possible to write about the future without fetishizing technology?

Of course. Apocalyptic science fiction has always done so. When I started reading sci fi in the late 50s, at least half of what I read were After the Nuclear War scenarios.

And I feel in *Woman on the Edge of Time* I hardly fetishized technology. The people of Mattapoisett used technology but weren't driven by it. They had rejected its use in some fields.

How would you characterize your political or ideological origins? How has your political trajectory changed over time? Would you characterize your project as revolutionary?

I'd never characterize my trajectory. That's for other people to do. Especially when I'm dead. My political ideas changed when feminism of the second wave developed. I had read Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* partly in French, then far more easily in English as soon as it came out. But there was almost no context then for my feminist leanings until in 1967, we began to organize in women's liberation. I learned a lot from Marxism but probably lean more toward syndicalist anarchism

What are the dangers and pleasures of writing religion in science fiction?

Everything is of a piece for me. I use the same craft to produce a love poem, a poem about poverty or war, about Yom Kippur,

about loss and death and birth and nature and my cats.

In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, I had people in different villages celebrate different cultures that often included specific spiritual or religious practices. In a golem novel like *He, She and It*, of course religion is important. When you remove religion from the golem, you get Superman.

Can including religion in SF be a way of justifying or reinforcing the persistence of hope in otherwise bleak futures?

Religions have done far more damage over the centuries than good. Religion may help individuals to bear hard times and trouble and loss, but institutionalized religion of all stripes quickly becomes dangerous. Established religion always seems to breed a them vs us mentality that has lead to crusades, pogroms, ethnic cleansing, the Inquisition, genocide, civil war, and legal discrimination.

***Woman on the Edge of Time* was identified by William Gibson as a precursor to cyberpunk. Any comment?**

Cyberpunk very much influenced *He, She and It*. The Glop is a cyberpunk notion. When I was doing a residence at Loyola in Chicago, one of my students turned me on to cyberpunk and I read a big bunch of it, continuing my interest in Gibson long afterward.

Kim Stanley Robinson

2018 February

The central conceit of this issue of *Big Echo* is that *Capital* is a science fictional text. We just had a conversation with Cory Doctorow in which he argued that Marxism was inherently techno-utopian, that it sought social transformation through technological revolution. Would you agree with that position?

It's been a long time since I've looked into *Capital*, and I'm not sure any more what is in that book and what is in other writings by Marx and Engels. My impression is that *Capital* is not science fictional. It's a historical analysis with particular political ramifications. Science fiction also does historical analysis and has political ramifications, so I can sort of see what you're saying here, but it might make just as much sense to reverse this formulation and say science fiction is Marxist, because it performs a similar mental operation. I don't think that's necessarily true either.

One caveat here is I can't remember how much of Marx's predictions or prescriptions for future actions are in *Capital*—I thought they were mostly in *The Communist Manifesto* and other writings. I definitely think there are two parts to Marx. In one, where he is analyzing the past, he is a historian and philosopher, and one of the best and most important ever to have lived. In the other, when he either predicts the future, declaring it is determined, or else calls for a particular future by way of choice and action, he is being a science fiction writer. Even a utopian science fiction writer. I say this because I think the future is radially unpredictable, and anyone who begins to talk about the future in any detail is by that very act doing science fiction of

one sort or another. No one is any good at prediction, but there can be interesting science fiction nevertheless.

So, I'm not going to re-read *Capital* to figure out where in his writing Marx's futurism lies, but you can tell me.

As for Cory's remark that Marxism is inherently techno-utopian, I would de-strand those parts that are squished together in the word "techno-utopian." Marxism is utopian, yes, despite Marx and Engels' attacks on the utopians of their time. And Marx and Engels were often over-confident about science and technology and what those can do for us, so I think this is what Cory might be referring to; Marx and Engels asserted pretty often that science can solve all the problems presented by overpopulation and environmental destruction, and here they were wrong, to the point of espousing a sort of scientism in some sentences (although in others they show more restraint and ecological awareness, as in the idea of the metabolic rift). But I'd say the center of their utopian dream comes from a reworking of the political-economic system to make it more just, by way of a horizontalization of wealth and power, or in their terms, an end to class differences.

It's maybe possible to argue that law, justice, and language are all systems, therefore like software systems, therefore also technologies. But in that sense, everyone is a techno-utopian. Here the implication is that Marxism believes the system software to be the important part, rather than the machinery per se; that social forces drive which machinery gets funded and built on a civilizational scale. I suspect Cory would agree with all this.

In a short essay on *Capital* at 150, Radhika Desai argued that the two most significant contributions of the book were that it historicizes capitalism and gives us a method by which we can understand that history. Is that a fair reduction of the text? And to what extent is the SFnal project historical as much as futurological?

Adam Smith and others historicized capitalism before Marx did, and he also historicized the doing of history itself, as well

as describing world history from the prehistoric period to his present, with some thoughts about what that vision of history suggested in terms of historical trajectories, thus what would come next. So I don't disagree with this first statement, but want to add that it's bigger than historicizing capitalism per se.

Marx's method of analysis is indeed his major contribution and gift to the rest of us, so I agree completely with the second part of this description.

The science fictional project is mainly a historical project, and to the extent there is any such thing as a futurological project, that would also be a historical project, so this isn't a good distinction to try to make. I don't think there are any valid futurisms or futurologies. I think most people who describe themselves as futurists or futurologists are claiming too much, almost to the point of being scam artists, especially if they charge people fees for them to come in and do consultations, as sometimes happens in the business world, or as a form of "edutainment." Because the future can't be predicted (possibly my essay asserting this is online at Scientific American, though I'm not sure), it's best to leave all this at the level of science fiction, which for me is mainly a literary genre.

For me, science fiction has a kind of double action as a genre, and the image I use to convey this thought is the 3-D glasses you wear at 3-D movies to create the false impression of three dimensionality. Through one lens, SF tries to describe one possible future in great detail; not a prediction, but a modeling exercise or scenario. Not "this Will happen," but "this Could happen." Then the other lens is simply a metaphorical or symbolic portrayal of what's going on right now. "It is as if we are all zombies being predated on by vampires"—this is my current candidate for the best metaphor for our times, even though people are too scared to write that one down, it seems. Anyway more traditional examples are "it is as if the working class are robots who may revolt," or "it is as if cities are spaceships detached from Earth," both older SF metaphors. Cyborgs are great images of us now, as Donna Haraway showed long ago. On it goes that way through that lens, symbolist prose poems of great power. Then, when

the images coming through the two lenses coalesce to a single vision in the mind's eye, what pops into visibility is History itself, often deep time, casting into the future as well as back to the past. That's how science fiction works and what it does.

You are often pretty *longue durée*, as was Marx, for that matter. How does choice of scale impact the stories you tell and the thinking that precedes them?

It's been a huge problem for me in aesthetic terms, because the novel is better suited to cover a few years, or at most a single lifetime, in some sort of biographical novel. Multi-generational sagas are a weak form to me, because readers never care about the third and fourth generation characters as much as the first ones, in any such novel. Even the best multi-generational novel, Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, suffers from this structural/emotional weakness inherent in the form.

So then to contemplate a novel covering 200 years, as in my Mars trilogy, or 700 years, as in *The Years of Rice and Salt*, was daunting. I solved the problems structurally by way of longevity treatments and reincarnation, giving me characters that lived through the whole story. But the problem still remained—in stories covering so much time, whatever happens that is worth dramatizing at the level of the scene, which is the basic unit of fiction? Especially if you don't believe in the great man, or the turning point battle theories of history, but in a more social, Braudelian long durée historical process? It was a big problem for me, occupying many years of my life and creating many sleepless hours. But in the end it was an opportunity too.

Is it possible to write about the future without fetishizing technology?

Yes. But this is because you used the verb fetishizing, which is pretty strong. In writing about the future you have to think about, and discuss, technology. Especially if you agree that language and law and justice are technologies, being civilizational

softwares. If that's the case, and even if you think of technology as material tools only, still, humans have been technological since before we were human, in that pre-humans had technologies, and then evolved in a co-evolutionary process with those technologies. So we are *homo faber* indeed, a technological species. So, can you write about the human future without writing about sight, or hearing, or biology, or tools? Can you write about humanity's future without talking about humans? No.

How would you characterize your political/ideological origins? How has your political trajectory changed over time? Would you characterize your project as revolutionary?

I went to college during the Vietnam War, at UCSD where Fredric Jameson was my teacher and Marcuse was still around, and I got a sophisticated political education there, from Jameson and many others, including my fellow students. Later I met and studied with Gary Snyder, whose writing had already taught me a lot about how to be a young Californian writer. Gary's own background was Pacific Northwest IWW, so he has always been an important, exemplary figure for me. Lastly I got to work with Ursula Le Guin on writing SF, also with Samuel R. Delany, Gene Wolfe, and many other fine SF writers, including my first editor Damon Knight, who was a leftist in New York in the 1940s. So I was very lucky in my teachers, and I read widely, and I was part of the Sixties generation, including the California New Age hippie Buddhist mountaineering element. I am a very characteristic example of my place and time, greatly influenced by my friends and my era.

That political trajectory was set so strongly, it has not changed much in the years since. I'm still working out ideas and principles that were ambient at that time. The years since the Reagan-Thatcher counterrevolution of 1980 have been frustrating and sometimes infuriating. I would say the ugliness of the Bush torture/war administration was the low point of my political life, as well as perhaps in the history of the United States, such that even what is happening now is not (yet) quite as bad. So I've been trying to figure out ways to make the leftist

interpretation of history more compelling to more people. Even getting back to New Deal Keynesianism would be a victory given where we are now, but now in our global moment we probably need even more than that; it's just we may pass through that again on the way to something even more progressive and just and sustainable.

My project is to be a novelist, and to try to write good novels, to be a good artist. That's it for me, first and last. A very bourgeois romantic hippie Buddhist Californian goal in life, I know. But also, if trying for that means telling revolutionary stories, as so often it seems to me, then I do that. I do it in the hope it makes a good novel. All art is political, so that's not the issue; and novels, being built of meanings, are the most political of the arts. So it's a necessity to get involved in that way.

But I find myself always questioning what revolution means in our time. Some of the big revolutions of the past caused so much death, and such gigantic backlashes into ultimately reactionary results, that I am like many others, I question their efficacy, and wonder if a subtler and cleverer and less painful and more successful form for revolution can be invented for our time. I'm willing to entertain the thought that it might be a stepwise process taking many years, and that we might be able to surge our way there without violence on any side. Raymond Williams wrote of "the long revolution," and I wonder if science itself is the long revolution under another name. I've been trying to model a historical vision that sees science as utopian, and thus opposed to capitalism, rather than complicit with, and even a tool of capitalism. That's a battle we are fighting, not a natural position or permanent result—to make science in charge, or in service of all, rather than subject to capitalist logic. For sure science's impact on humanity and the world has been revolutionary, if you give it the full four hundred years of its modern run. But along with the scientific revolution (ongoing) has been capitalism (ongoing), so I see this as a Manichean struggle between cosmic conjoined twins, as in some Hindu myth; basically human social good versus human social bad; and who wins is still uncertain.

Rather than calling my project revolutionary, I'd just like to say I'm an American leftist who writes science fiction novels.

There are still arguments out there that pit SF that is analytical about class against SF that is analytical about gender and race. Any thoughts?

Does this really come up? If so that would be bad. Maybe I'm naive about the present state of the left, and of course it has always had way too much infighting, damaging the cause for everyone. Freud named this fight the narcissism of small differences, and it's a good name, because to get so caught up in your own particular ideology that even your own allies are denounced is indeed narcissistic. And ineffective in creating real political change.

The natural argument against this point is that these are not small differences, but big ones, and need to be fought over. Maybe so. But I always want to point out that the front is broad, and capital uses our arguments against each other to split us apart from each other in the common fight against capital.

So, SF that is analytical about class—is there really any wall between that kind (which is where these days, anyway?) and the kind of SF that is analytical about gender and race? I think the last 30 to 40 years of discussion have made it clear that patriarchy and capitalism are tightly allied and reinforce each other, and both are bad. Gender discrimination is a deep fundamental class division of a discrimination, and the problem of unpaid social reproduction being appropriated and exploited to support the ordinary economic exploitations of ordinary class need to be addressed, and the situation made just—this would be one central feature of post-capitalism. Nancy Fraser is exceptionally clear on this, a leading thinker on this front. Meanwhile race is another kind of Othering and dehumanization, a form of discrimination that allows capital to dominate many people, by way of fear, prejudice, hegemony, and so on. Fanon and even Sartre were very good on this more than 60 years ago, and it's been made very obvious since then in the work and lives of many

people, despite which it is still an ongoing struggle, as we see all the time.

In other words, the situation has been made clear, and none of these forms of oppression can be solved without all the others being solved as well. There is no such thing as a feminist capitalism, there is no such thing as a non-racist capitalism. Every leftist must needs be a feminist and anti-racist, it's part of the definition of the left, and although every individual novel has to pick its particular topic, being a novel and not a world (people do tend to mistake the two), there is no need to set up either-ors when it comes to discussing these things. They are all part of one system, and we're in a battle and the front is broad. It's best to accept that your allies in this battle may have different emphases than you do, and even disagreements about tactics and so on, without them becoming enemies. A vision of the total project is important, which is why utopian fiction matters, because that's one place where the vision comes into being.

What would you characterize as the most exciting developments in contemporary SF writing over the last twenty years? How do you see it proceeding?

I haven't been able to read enough contemporary SF to know much about this. To a certain extent I keep my distance now, so that I am freer in my novels to get strange without knowing that I'm getting strange, so that I don't scare myself. Since I don't know what everyone else is like, I can't try to be more like them. So a big part of me, the working part of me, avoids knowing the field now. Are my books weird or normal? I don't know, and it's better that way.

Also there's too much good stuff to read. Also, I do still read many of my friends in the field, who tend to be about my age, so that I end up a bit ignorant about the new good writing. I'm sure it's out there.

I do try to catch up a little when I can, by reading a book here or there and seeing what's new. There's a lot that I try and then find it too conventional, in literary terms. Remember I began

reading SF during the New Wave, and that is still for me the literary high point in SF's history. Then also, I usually want more science, and more near-future proleptic realisms. I want more finance and more leftist visions. I like seeing that there are more women writing SF, and more people of color writing SF, and more people in China and India writing SF, and I hope for more from all these. It's a good sign that SF, and therefore global society, are getting stronger. Everyone needs a positive vision of the future for themselves and their people and culture, so everyone needs to be doing SF.

I like SF a lot more than fantasy. As for fantasy, and the rise of fantasy over science fiction in our time, I often repeat an old phrase of H.G. Wells: where anything is possible, nothing is interesting. This feeling kills most fantasy for me. And as Jameson once remarked, trying to cut the Gordian knot between fantasy and science fiction, fantasy is about pre-capitalist societies, while science fiction is about capitalist and post-capitalist societies. I'm more interested in these. Indeed for me science fiction is the realism of our time, and the strongest genre alive today. So this keeps me oriented toward science fiction. I want lots more young writers of all backgrounds, types, races, ethnicities, and genders writing science fiction. That would be the best for all.

Plus I am interested in science, and think of it as an undertheorized utopian politics already active in the real world. So my hope is to see more science fiction that interprets history and science in that way, and writes stories accordingly, to make that perception clearer, and even perhaps to help make it more real.

Returning to *Capital*, could it be argued it politicizes time: the project isn't to predict the future, but to change it.

I still doubt thinking of *Capital* as SF is useful except in the most general sense of getting one thinking how both are ways of regarding history. As for "the future" as an idea, I seem to recall another remark Jameson once made, that the future came into being during the French Revolution. A sense of the future was something the Enlightenment perhaps did, which was to create

such a quick break with the early modern period in so many different ways that the future rose into general consciousness as a place that was going to be different from the present and past. Also, that humanity was confronted with different possible futures, and present actions could help to bring one future into being rather than another. This doesn't seem to be a strong idea in culture until after the time of the great revolutions, and then it becomes part of the discussion, and in those early moments of awareness of "the future," you see the appearance of science fiction as a genre. It's often remarked that "science fiction" is an inaccurate name, and my definition for the genre is all the stories that are set in the future (although I would not want to change the genre's name, as it is a very productive misnaming).

So, there are all kinds of assumptions that shape our understanding of the future, and one I can mention is that we make assumptions about the rate of change that will occur in the future. This is simple enough to be graphed: we often talk about "straight line extrapolation" in which the rate of change persists as it is, then there is accelerating change, and also decelerating change, less often mentioned, as change has been accelerating for a while now. But the logistic curve, a kind of big S in which slow change eventually accelerates and speeds up, but then hits various physical constraints or the like, and slows down again, is a very common phenomenon in nature. I find reasons to believe that the logistic curve will probably describe the rate of change in human history—but when will the curves in this big S graph occur? No one can say. So it is over-simple, only one factor, and does little to help us predict or envision the real future coming. It's just one more tool for thinking about something that resists thought.

We talked a little about Braudel's *longue durée* and you mentioned Raymond Williams' "Long Revolution." Both are attempts to justify a slow pace to social and cultural change by arguing that such changes occur on a slower track than political, and that to force the issue too quickly invites catastrophe. I'm curious if that sort of multi-track thinking about time and change is also a part of your world-building and storytelling.

I had those two long durée novels, and there I had to think about these things; also to an extent in *2312*, *Aurora*, and even *Shaman* in a different way. But my own work is quite a bit more intuitive and ad hoc than your question suggests. I don't see them well until after I've written them, and even then I'm stuck inside them to an extent, and in any case have moved on. So I don't know about this.

In general I think some changes are very slow, take longer than a human life, and yet we still have to persist in working to make them happen. This is a hard thing to grasp. Raymond Williams has another concept, the residual and emergent: each historical moment is composed of residual factors going far back into prehistory, but also very prominently, persisting from the immediately previous world economic system: thus capitalism's residual is feudalism, and we see those feudal remnants everywhere, often still dominating the situation. But there are good residuals too, many out of the paleolithic.

Then the emergent is harder to see precisely because it is new and not yet fully emerged or formed, so one has to guess at this. I call it post-capitalism because we can't be sure what it's going to be yet, and labelling it is maybe a good attempt to influence what it will be, but then again, we could easily be wrong as to what is actually emerging. Also both good and bad things could be emerging at once—it looks that way right now—and so it isn't just a case of seeing what's coming and helping it—we have choices to make about which emerging phenomena to support and which to oppose. Thinking of this mesh of past and future is a good tool however.

In your own work, how have you gone about exploring the profound connections between economic exploitation and other forms of oppression?

As a straight white American male artist, getting older, I have been interested to figure out how I can help make a better world, having lived a life of incredible privilege and luck when compared to most human lives so far. It's not obvious how to

do this, especially since my chosen art form, the novel, has historically been a form about the bourgeoisie and their problems. That's my class, that's my form. But the novel is big and powerful—maybe that's not a coincidence, given its origins, but also, every human is in love with stories and even addicted to stories, and novels are one of the best story forms ever invented. And ideologies are made of stories, they are a kind of story. So it becomes suggestive when you think of it that way.

Virginia Woolf spoke of Shakespeare as being androgynous, and the writer's goal being to be like that, to be an absent presence, to try to speak the other, to try to imagine other minds in other times and places, and see what happens when that attempt is made. No art or artist can escape history, but a good novel can examine history and think about what it means, and that's what I've tried to do with my novels.

Politically, it seems to me that all forms of oppression are bad, and they are interlinked and feed off each other, and the economic is just the way we legalize, quantify, and enforce injustice, and the exploitation of the many by a few. Different novels of mine have given me more or fewer opportunities to tell stories that link all oppressions together into a system of habits. I tried to discuss their origins in *Shaman*, I tried to historicize them in *The Years of Rice and Salt*, and I've explored ways we might do better as a global civilization, and make a more just and equal society, in many of my other novels. These efforts have bent the novels into odd shapes, but also, these are good and interesting stories to tell, and to an extent they are even new stories.

Science fiction has been a marvelous escape from the dead end much "literary fiction" is in now, stirring the dead ashes of the great modernist works, and getting caught up in the narcissism of late capitalist bourgeois neurosis. SF is outsider art, looked down on by official literary culture, and that's such a great place to be. It's outside the MFA system, outside postmodernism, it's even replacing the postmodern with the Anthropocene, historicizing and politicizing everything, able to take on science and use science's exploding new vocabulary—well, there are many reasons why science fiction is the great realism

of our time, and some of them are because of the traps it has avoided, either by its own efforts or by others misunderstanding and rejecting it.

I saw the SF community accept difference well before the general American culture did, and now I'm seeing it being filled with young people of all descriptions, who are using it to imagine and call for futures that will be better for them. Recently there was a very stupid objection to SF being "taken over" by "social justice warriors"—for one thing, this is a great development; for another, SF has always had a very strong strand of social justice advocacy in it. So really there is no problem here to worry about, in terms of which injustice is primary or whatnot. Just remember the front is broad and attack at the place that matters to you most.

Michael Swanwick

2018 February

What do you think of a project to treat Marx's *Capital* as a science fictional text?

I'd argue that it's already been done and often. Jack London based "A Literary Fragment" on that vision and J. G. Ballard's "The Subliminal Man" is all about capitalism's need for constantly expanding markets. I've done two stories on related themes myself, "From Babel's Fall'n Glory We Fled..." and "The Dead.' There have been plenty of others, I'm sure.

I should probably state here that I'm not a devotee of Marx. I'm not perpetually awaiting the birth of a Worker's Paradise. I'm just someone who's afraid he might be right.

Which part of Marx are you afraid is right? Diagnosis or cure?

It's the diagnosis that money and power must necessarily wind up in increasingly fewer and increasingly crueler hands that fills me with dread. Nor, if Marx was right, do I look forward to the desperate revolution this will inevitably lead to. Particularly since the technology of oppression and intimidation has gotten so much better in the 150 years since *Das Kapital* was published. We're at the dawn of the age of robot armies. One can easily imagine robots enforcing control over slave populations long after the last capitalist has died. That would really be Marxism without hope.

The cure—the people seizing control of the means of production, etc., etc.—does sound better than the disease. But it's harder to believe in after the Great Terror. In practice, the Soviet

experiment was flawed at best. My friend Andrew Matveev is a writer who wanted to be the Russian Hunter S. Thompson when he was young. He submitted his first novel and was called into the publisher's office and told, "This book will never be published." Then he was sent into internal exile. That's anything but a Workers' Paradise. Writing in present-day capitalist Russia has its own problems. But, Matveev said, "They took from me a part of what I could have been." In Russia I quickly learned to brace myself whenever somebody began a statement with, "In Soviet times..." Because what came next would inevitably sizzle your hair.

So I find it hard to believe in the happy ending that Marx promised. But I could be wrong. It's happened before. Mostly, I hold out hope that we'll muddle through somehow. That's happened before too.

What does it mean to "see everything in terms of economics"? What would a SF look like that saw everything in terms of economics?

More SF does that than most of us realize. One of the basic pieces of advice for turning a neat idea into a story is, "Ask yourself this: Who does it hurt? Then write about that person." And what else is economics but an examination of mechanisms and consequences? Larry Niven wrote several stories applying this question to teleportation. His answer included: bridge painters, automobile manufacturers (but not motorcycle companies, for bikers would now have the roads to themselves), and people who could no longer move far, far away from abusive ex-spouses.

What is the relation of history to your work? Do you have a philosophy of history or time?

I don't think I have a philosophy of time or of history. I'm just a consumer of them.

You famously said you didn't care much for repeating yourself but it is difficult not to. If you were to look hard at the body of your work what would be repetitive in it?

Identity. Sex as a motive force. Family. I was raised Catholic and that never goes away, so I hope I have compassion for the flawed and suffering. I had a lot of low-paying jobs when I was young, which gave me a strong awareness of class—something most Americans like to pretend either doesn't exist or doesn't matter. Oh, and transcendence. There's a lot of transcendence in my work.

But, really, I'm not the person to ask about this. I'm far more interested in everything else than in me.

Might you develop what you mean by transcendence just a little more?

Transcendence is by definition being lifted above and beyond the universe as we know it. In Catholicism, by going to Heaven. In science fiction, it generally happens through enhancement of the human brain or by piggybacking off of superior alien technology and it's usually called the Singularity. In my own work, it generally occurs at the point where technology and religion intersect. (There's no getting around the fact that I have a mystic streak.)

And that's all I know on the subject. The mechanisms of transcendence employed in my fiction are all *ad hoc*. Nor do I have any idea why that particular trope comes up so frequently. I have a lot of upbeat positive futures in my fiction, but they all occur far enough in the future that problems besetting us have been resolved (somehow) in the past.

Is it possible to write about the future without fetishizing technology?

It's done all the time. But I don't think fetishizing technology in fiction is necessarily a bad thing when fetishized

technology—whether it's a hot car or a new iPhone—is a part of our daily lives. It's possible we need more of it in our fiction, just to keep up.

One of the most interesting questions you can ask of most SF novels set more than a century in the future is, "What happened to television?" It's rarely present and nothing seems to have specifically replaced it. So there's a kind of anti-fetishization going on there, a nostalgic wishfulness that the future will be a return to an idyllic past that never existed anywhere outside of our imaginations.

Is it possible to write about the future without politicizing it?

I think not. And I believe it's potentially strongest when writers believe they're not doing it. The unstated, unacknowledged assumptions of their time and class permeate the work. The British Museum acquired a kouros—an ancient Greek statue of a naked male youth—in Victorian times which was seen as a particularly splendid example of its kind. A hundred years later, a curator glanced at it, stopped, and said, "Oh." It was a forgery and enough time had passed that the Victorian elements in the sculptor's style that no one could then see had become obvious to the modern eye. So, too, with politics. If they're not conscious, they're unconscious. And time is very good at separating the gold from the dross, the wheat from the chaff.

So it seems I have a philosophy of time after all!

I'm curious about power shifts in the genre landscape. How do you see SF proceeding?

I am extremely wary about movements and schools of literature because by the time they're done announcing themselves, they're over. In fact, I was the first person to declare cyberpunk dead, back in 1986—though not long before the writers themselves did.

But there are a couple of broad trends worth noting. One is the large number of writers doing slipstream fiction—mainstream,

essentially, but with a fantastic edge. So far as can be told, slipstream is far more popular with writers than it is with readers. I've heard that *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, which is the field's preeminent publisher of slipstream (among other things) has more submissions monthly than either *Asimov's* or *Analog*. I haven't checked the assertion but that sounds about right.

The other is a growing fondness on the part of genre writers for writing stories that are neither science fiction nor fantasy, but rather a hybrid form. One where the fantastic element is not rationalized, as in traditional SF, but then treated as if the story were science fiction rather than fantasy. I think that doing so abandons science fiction's key strength—the ability to rigorously examine a clearly presented idea. But I've written a lot of stuff that blurs the line between science fiction and fantasy, so that may be just rank hypocrisy on my part.

What is the role of absurdity in your writing, or even science fiction in general?

I'm afraid that absurdity is built into the nature of reality. That's one reason why Philip K. Dick has had such a successful posthumous career while far better writers and extrapolators—John Brunner comes to mind—have not. Woody Allen put it best when he said that life is "full of loneliness and misery and suffering and unhappiness—and it's all over much too quickly."

We laugh at things to show we're not afraid of them. And apparently we find the human condition uproarious. I think that's kind of glorious of us.

Natalia Theodoridou

2018 February

The central conceit of this issue of *Big Echo* is that *Capital* is a science fictional text. If you have any immediate thoughts on that (good idea, bad idea, obvious idea, stupid idea) we'd love to know them. If you would prefer a more focused question, Cory Doctorow suggested in an interview with us that Marxism was inherently (even essentially) techno-utopian, that it sought social transformation through technological revolution. Would you agree with that position?

I think that all philosophical writing is science fictional in the sense that it offers up new technologies for thinking. This is going to sound simplistic, but it makes for a good analogy: once you see Marxism's point about capitalism, you can never unsee it, in the same way that once you've understood the concept of scrolling or swiping on a touch screen, you can't forget it; your relationship with the screen has changed, to the point where you might even come to expect scroll/swipe/touch-ability from every screen, eventually even from every surface. It alters the interface through which you interact with the world.

But yes, I do agree. The logical conclusion to which Marxism leads is a post-scarcity society in which technology enables fair living. However, that doesn't mean that you cannot be Marxist while also being a pessimistic technophobe, especially when it comes to art (see Adorno, for example). You shouldn't, in my opinion, but you could. Perhaps Adorno misconstrued Marx, or perhaps he was Marxist in some respects and not others (or we could even abandon the idea that people are coherent wholes governed by consistent thought).

Also, even though I agree that Marxism was techno-utopian, I would like to point out the determinism in that position, which, while maintaining the importance of class unity, fails to account sufficiently for cultural difference and intersectionality. Intersectionality, however, should not erase class in favour of other forms of oppression, as is the case when it is used to advocate for a more humane capitalism. More on that later.

In her short essay on *Capital* at 150 by Radhika Desai argued that the two most significant contributions of the book were that it historicizes capitalism and gives us a method by which we can understand that history. Is that a fair reduction of the text? And to what extent is the SFnal project historical as much as futurological? I am thinking here especially of "The Nightingales in Plátres"

I'm not sure what the SFnal project is, because that formulation implies a sort of ideological or at least aspirational homogeneity (or even coherence) that I do not think exists, and which cannot exist in the wild cultural diversity from which SF now emerges. That said, I would like to break down the question a little: I do not see as sharp a distinction between historical writing and futurological writing as the question implies.

I would like to borrow from Hayden White's historiographical work (*Metahistory*, 1973), which described history as a verbal structure that adheres to literary genres and utilizes literary devices. So you can read, for example, certain national histories as romantic dramas of self-identification that culminate in present triumph. Nations are then retroactively projected as essences that emerged deterministically (as in a romance) rather than, say, as constructs that resulted from specific socio-political and economic conflicts in which the vast majority of people are trapped and exploited (as in a satire).

So, in my understanding, one of the things Marxism did was expose the fictional framing of capitalism up to that point as a teleological tale of triumph. In doing so, it re-framed capitalism as simply one chapter in a different genre of history.

You know, I like how, in Greek, "history" and "story" are the same word. It makes the connection between history and fiction harder to miss.

Now, to address Desai's essay specifically: I found the following particularly apt: "Such social sciences couch everything in simple present tense—parties do this, governments to that, inflation does this, unemployment does that forgetting that parties change over time, no two episodes of inflation or unemployment are the same and the actions of historical agents change the terrain of the further unfolding of history. The historical work of necessarily national classes, parties and states in managing capitalism's contradictions through domestic and international actions were written out of the script. Nothing could be farther from *Capital*."

Indeed. The present tense strips practices from their historical specificity, making them appear eternal. To connect this back to art, Nelson Goodman's famous reconceptualization of the question "What is art?" as "When is art?" (*Ways of Worldmaking*, 1978) brings to the fore precisely such concerns. This strategy of making ahistorical pronouncements about how things, including art, go is how modern mythologies are born: money makes the world go round, working class people don't read, science fiction is escapist. It is known.

I am intrigued by your idea to discuss "The Nightingales in Plátres" in this context, but of course you are right. It is a story in which the future is predicated on the past in a very intense way, because it is about trying to make sense of the world through canonical texts (i.e. historical artefacts) and intertextually. To me, texts are technologies, they are machines for thinking, and as such they can also be weapons. To remember Deleuze ("Postscripts on the Societies of Control," 1992), "there is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons." I think that we could easily read that as "only for new texts."

I am particularly curious about the theoretical and philosophical elements of your work. Might you say a word or two about how you use such elements for inspiration, framing or style?

I think the theoretical underpinnings of my work are implied in the rest of this discussion, but I can expand on a few points.

First, I do not see a distinction between theory (or philosophy), and practice, in the sense that theorizing and philosophizing (and thinking) are practices. I tend to turn abstract nouns into verbs in order to avoid the a-historicization of practice, no matter the field. So I am interested in doing theory and in what theory does—or, rather, what people do with it and with philosophy.

Second, fiction is often my way of working through questions or points I stumble upon in my forays into critical theory and philosophy. I have a background in Drama and Religious studies and my PhD was in Media and Cultural Studies. So, "The Nightingales in Plátres," for instance, was about leaps of faith. I've always found faith in religion incomprehensible, and yet I've met and lived with people who absolutely and completely had faith. This presented me with a paradox, an aporia, a point at which my world and their world paralyzingly did not cohere. That's where the story came from.

Similarly, my Choice of Games project is about the mediatization of individual experience. "Android Whores Can't Cry" used Buddhism-inspired practices of thinking as a way to work through issues of selfhood. "The Emptiness Machine" was prompted by Baudrillard's neighbourhood, described in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981).

My writing tends to be eclectic and intertextual. I think one of the exercises that excite me the most when exploring characters is the occultism of creating a person that appears coherent while also believing firmly in the idea of the self as pastiche, as a series of constantly shifting positionalities.

Is it possible to write about the future without fetishizing technology?

Sometimes I find it helpful to point out that technological fiction (or speculative fiction that focuses on technology) is only one strand of science fiction. SF does (and in my opinion

should) include the social sciences (and where the line is between social sciences and the relatively new iterations of humanities like cultural studies or media studies is debatable). So if writing about the future is the purview of what we understand as science fiction then yes, one can absolutely write about the future without fetishizing technology, because there are myriads of other potential foci for that future-facing fiction to center on.

How would you characterize the political or ideological origins of your fiction? How has your political trajectory changed over time? Would you characterize your project as revolutionary?

I am and have always been somewhere on the Left, anti-capitalist and anti-fascist, edging closer to anarchism the older I get. However, my Left is a Left with a very specific history and cultural context that is very hard to describe without going on a long and complicated tangent about the political history of modern Greece.

One of the failures of the Left in Greece has been its inability to grasp intersectionality while maintaining ideological and political integrity. This can be partly explained by the specific history of the development of identity politics, but I think there are ways to couple identity politics and Marxism in radical ways. I am adamant about the importance of intersectionality in political practice, but I think it is crucial to ask: intersectionality to what end? To end oppression, yes, but what is it that enables oppression and on what is it premised? I cannot find an answer that doesn't point back to capitalism (via notions like family, patriarchy, the nation, the race, and so on). So, for me, intersectionality is fundamental to better unite against capitalism; it is necessary in order to build better solidarity. To paraphrase Flavia Dzodan, my anti-capitalism, like my feminism, needs to be intersectional, or it, too, will be bullshit (see also Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," 1989).

What would you characterize as the most exciting developments in contemporary SF writing since you have been participating in the scene? How do you see it proceeding?

One of the things that brings me the most joy is the gradual breakdown of the boundaries between speculative fiction and "realist" or "mainstream" or "literary" (or whatever other inane term you prefer) fiction. This is not about being vindicated as a "genre" writer. I'm putting "genre" in scare quotes here because "literary" is not a genre. It's like insisting you have "no politics" or "no ideology" in your fiction—what makes your politics and your ideology invisible to you is that they are the dominant politics and the dominant ideology. Neither is it about gaining legitimacy in the literary scene or anything like that. I think, or I hope, that the breakdown is the result of a growing realization that what's being framed and represented as reality, and which representations are deemed realistic, is ideological. In fact, this is exactly what ideology is about: the totalizing denial of its own existence, suturing over anything that might give away that it does not completely match the world. "Realism," in this sense, is just another word for the dominant ideology in artistic practice, just another mode of engaging the world—like "objectivity," that "unauthored voice of the bourgeoisie" (Fiske, *Television Culture*, 1987). This is what I see in "SF" and "F" and "weird" that is becoming more widely embraced: a loosening of our anxious grip on what constitutes the accepted (and acceptable) limits of reality, a realization that, by having reality framed for us by others, we are at the same time being framed. In all senses of the word.

Andrew Joron

Interview by Peter Milne Greiner, 2018 May

In an interview in 2010 with Garrett Caples, you talked about leaving the writing community you grew up in—science fiction—and shifting your attention to the experimental poetry community, because in your view the latter community was more sympathetic to the type of work you found yourself producing. You mentioned that "leaving home" in this way was not something you regretted. What would a letter home sound like these days? In "Reversing River" from your latest collection *The Absolute Letter*, you reference Heinlein's "dilating door"—doing so has become a tradition in and of itself in the SF community. Is this a letter home? In what ways does (or must) your current speculative enterprise "keep in touch" with science fiction?

I came of age in the late '60s, when the experimental spirit of the New Wave was at its height in SF. That formative moment has permanently defined my approach to the genre. I regard SF as a mode of writing that is—or has the potential to be—speculative in form and style as well as content. It's very savvy of you to notice the line from Heinlein in my latest book of experimental poetry, and to call it "a letter home." But beyond such sampling of classic phrases from SF, my work in poetry has always been committed to the "cognitive estrangement" of language itself. As I explain in my book of essays, *The Cry at Zero*, I understand language as a self-organizing system capable of "phase transitions" toward wholly new states of being. Keeping in mind that language originally emerged from sound, I have attempted to pursue, in my poetry, the sound-wave of language as it expands

into zones where meaning becomes secondary to vibratory patterns, corresponding to those convulsive force fields by which the universe makes itself. These investigations obviously could not be conducted within the SF genre, although they were carried out with a cosmic perspective inculcated largely by my engagement with SF.

As others have pointed out already, the compositions in *The Absolute Letter* seek to identify, mine, and enunciate (I would hazard to add, dream) English homophonic coincidence—and so reveal an alphabet that is at once profoundly agile, that can create a cosmos of meaning, but is also consequently on the verge of collapse by nature, relying as it does so heavily on a relatively infinitesimal set of tools, including the human vocal apparatus. If language is emergent of sound—of human physiology and its surrounding environments—and if one of its functions is to establish standardization that allows de-standardization to be understood readily, to what extent does that language interpret (or investigate) its users? Put another way: if one of your callings is to conduct these investigations, to "count chance's chants," as you put it in one poem, do you consider your findings to be personal?

I don't regard the "personal" as an entity that can be separated from the rest of the universe. Instead, the personal is an interference pattern arising from the interaction of a multitude of transpersonal systems (biological, social, linguistic, etc.). The pattern sustains itself for a little while, acquiring a unique history that makes it recognizable to itself and others. Nonetheless, the personal can be no more than a surface phenomenon, a membrane enclosing, and enclosed by, abyssal depths. Conceptual "breakthroughs," whether in art or science, always break through this membrane. Listening to language speak, following the sound waves that cross between wor(l)ds ahead of meaning, is one way of making the breakthrough. And of course my personal pathway across these abysses will be to be different from anyone else's, if only because everything is always happening for

the first time. Moreover, because nothing repeats itself exactly, nothing can be standardized completely. The standardized elements of language, whether sonic, syntactic, or semantic, are simply frozen contingencies that, once we breathe on them (use them in a poem) quickly regain their fluidity.

Could close analysis of such a history, together with its attendant serialization of breakthroughs, be used reliably to predict the nature of a future breakthrough? I would avoid such predictions myself because I value the surprise element that is inherent to breakthroughs—but suppose one didn't, and suppose we were instead talking about translation—another of your endeavors. Would it be possible? Perhaps to suppose that such predictions are indeed possible assumes that breakthroughs are the culmination of coherently related steps. But often the architecture of that coherence is available to us only after the fact, after a breakthrough event that appears random or spontaneous. And so the breakthrough itself isn't the result (or rupture) we thought it would be. Is that what attracted you to translating Scheerbart's *The Perpetual Motion Machine*? Could it be argued that the act of translation in this sense is possessed of objectives other than making a text available in another language? Could *The Absolute Letter* be made available in another language?

Because poetry activates all the powers inherent in one's native language, it usually can't be translated successfully. Too much gets left behind: the sonic, syntactic, and semantic qualities unique to the source language—and the life of poetry is rooted in those qualities—have no exact equivalent in the target language. My own poetry turns crucially on the sound-plays and wordplays that English makes possible, and those moves can't be reproduced in—have no correspondent in—another language. For example, a line from *The Absolute Letter* reads: "I am a being from another word." That pun can't be translated because it needs the English spelling in order to work. I write under the spell of English. Nonetheless, translation happens—but

it's not what most people think it is. A translation can never give you direct access to the meaning of the original text. It's a paraphrase, a substitution. Whenever you exchange one word for another, the meaning inevitably changes. A translation is a creative act in its own right, a response to—rather than a reproduction of—the original. Walter Benjamin, in his classic essay "The Task of the Translator," asserted that in some mystical sense the translation "completes" the original by changing its meaning, and that both translation and original are equally derived from a "pure" language in which every word has infinite meaning. So that every truly poetic speech-act would be the result of this pure or absolute language breaking through the surface of ordinary language. Breakthroughs like this can't be predicted, or even reconstructed after the fact. They represent the "impossible" manifestation of the infinite within a finite thing: a word, a sound.

To what end (just an expression) and to what extent does your poetics source scientific critical thinking—the type of critical thinking that institutions train scientists to use in their practices and research? I ask because the timbre of your responses here reminds me of my correspondence with colleagues in the scientific community. Scientists and poets are taught, or learn, critical thinking in accordance with institutions and legacies, and their respective literatures are possessed of their own vocabularies, conventions, parlance. Underlying this bifurcation—these various modes (nodes) of inquiry—might be an absolute language of inquiry similar to the one you mentioned. How can the two schools inform each other if we consider them to be two "translations" that "complete" a shared investigation? Ethic? Or, more grandiosely, a shared and insatiable entelechial value? I invoke entelecheia here because Aristotle was under the spell of Greek.

You're right to invoke Aristotle: I believe Aristotle's Greek neologism "entelechy," referring to a form of motion that strives toward the realization of essential being, stands behind

Benjamin's notion of a "pure" language toward which all existing languages are heading. Aristotle envisioned everything in nature moving in this purposeful way toward self-realization. Of course the modern scientific world-picture no longer attempts to find an underlying purpose in nature. Evolution is random. Even if we see some systems evolving toward greater complexity, most systems in nature become increasingly disorganized over time (the law of entropy). Modern art has incorporated this sense of randomness and disorder. Scientists and poets are working along the same lines here, attempting to make sense of a universe that lacks inherent meaning. We could view this lack of meaning as liberating or annihilating, or both. The surrealist in me says that it's both.

Surrealism carries me swiftly to a twist. The word "pun"—short for pundigrion—has its origins in a language's interest in making fine points. Puns flourish in rhetoric of all stripes, and we delight in them because they are pleasurable and useful—hence their ubiquity in human communication and affairs. They are purposefully funny, often purposefully unfunny and therefore still funny, and they are designed (when they are, in fact, designed) to exploit our understanding of how funds of words are interrelated and entangled, slouching kaleidoscopically toward Alephs of laughter and sudden breakthroughs of clarity. And so the pun is a tool and a plaything we use in a quest for gratification, whether we're motivated by successfully landing a joke, or sucessfullying landing an argument—and all of the pleasures we're rewarded with by such successes. Throughout your career thus far, and especially in your most recent volume, you've emphasized the role of sensation in respect to experiences of sound. "I have lain in reverse agony / along the fracture-plains / of the calm and necessary voice," you wrote in a poem from your volume Science Fiction, published in 1991.When I hear your poems, in which puns are so often deployed and discovered, humor is a harmonic that rings above the other sonic and linguistic features and considerations we've touched on so far. You're funny!

Thank you for noticing. It's not often on the surface, but humor does form a part of my wordplay. Linguistic humor springs from unlikely meet-ups of, or mix-ups, of meaning—and that accident-prone intersection is where I live as a poet. Sometimes I feel as if I'm helping language to perpetrate its joke on consciousness: it's funny to see an all-too-earnest, all-too-innocent act of communication trip over its own feet. If I can create a sound-effect between two serious words, exposing the noise inside the name, I laugh to myself. Laughter is the shudder provoked by witnessing another's loss of innocence. The other, in this case, is the fool who occupies the subject-position in language, unaware of the trick that has substituted word for world. Aleph: a Laugh.

Vajra Chandrasekera

2018 August

How do you think about time in your writing?

The science fictional idea of time travel, at least in its most common forms, presupposes homogenous, empty time as a navigable landscape in which events occur, and in which one can move around and construct elaborate set pieces of paradox out of Heinleinian bootstraps. The device distinguishes firmly between *time* and *history*: the former is a landscape, objective and real, and the latter is a record, subjective and fallible, and the gaps between the two generate space for drama.

I find it more interesting, and more useful, to think of time as a fiction rather than a place. The past is imaginary, continually being produced in the now; always being composed and edited. The past-as-fiction has authors and is therefore always multiple—not in the sense of alternate realities separated by a veil (where the deviations from our norm might be helpfully marked by Orientalist tropes like Evil Beards) but as overlapping, competing arguments shouting over each other. Pasts and futures as a host of contradictory assertions of injury and claims for recompense. If time doesn't exist except *as* history, then we exist simultaneously in every timeline, with a multitude of ghostly, mutually contradictory causal chains dragging behind us.

The story of the battle between the cruel young prince and the wise old king is traditionally dated to 161 BCE (*Big Echo*: "Ruin's Cure," 2018). It has assumed so much prominence in contemporary Lankan discourse because of particular curatorial/propagandistic decisions made in the fifth and twentieth centuries. It's funny: you might think of history as a record that

gradually fades into murk and fable as one moves backward, but my favourite thing about the fabulism of the saint-king who cuts off his own head is that this story is centuries *closer* to us than the hyperrealist foundational myth of the cruel young prince and his house, thus placing it firmly in historical time. Score one for the Long-Ears!

If time is a fiction, then history is a machine for projecting contemporary selfhoods into the past and causing paradoxes and changes in the timeline. In "Ruin's Cure," I make that more literal: the historian's role isn't to document history but to discipline it. To require it to conform. In my review of Aliya Whiteley's "The Arrival of Missives," I talked about the difference between the preservative time travel narrative (the comfortable present attempting to preserve the horrific past so as to preserve its own causal chain) and the preventative one (the horrific future attempting to change the comfortable present to prevent its causal chain.) "Ruin's Cure" is also an attempt to do both: I allow the historian to move from preservation to prevention, because that movement—that moment of treachery—is so interesting to me.

How would a story like "Ruin's Cure" be different in your mother tongue? Or more generally what are your thoughts on translation? And especially translation in SF?

Translation, in the context of books and stories, is familiar as a distinct and separate act performed on a finished text, regulated by language-specific publication rights. This is a useful concept when we're talking about systemic attempts to bridge literatures across languages. Speculative fiction is starting to work with this in a more systematic way, which is wonderful—I've had the pleasure of editing issues of *Strange Horizons* featuring speculative fiction translated from Spanish and Arabic, as well as having been around for the very exciting launch of our sister magazine *Samovar,* focused specifically on speculative short fiction in translation. (Rachel Cordasco's excellent SF in Translation site is an invaluable hub for further information on both longform and short form translated work.)

But apart from this bigger and more organized sense of translation, I wonder sometimes: what does it even mean to be multilingual and composing a sentence? I think of this as a kind of translation too, just in a different and more informal magisterium, perhaps. I've written about the motherness of tongues before: when I say I write in English, this is also a little more complicated than it sounds. When you speak several languages, they inevitably infect each other, first on the tongue and then on the page. Languages mix in public, too, when millions of multilingual people occupy space together.

When I say "several languages," I mean that I speak Sinhala and English (and some French, though that's neither here nor there) but also that Sri Lankan English is distinct from American/British English, and for that matter that Sinhala is diglossic, having high and low registers with different grammatical rules, and so on. So even among "two" languages there are at least four distinct forms which might have something to contribute to grammar or vocabulary during the composition of a sentence.

So, inevitably, some sentences (especially dialogue, I find) must be translated as they are written, having been originally composed in something else. This is an "originally" that exists in the gap between mind and hand, sure, but brief and often mysterious as that gap is, this is still an act of translation.

This feels necessary partly because I'm conscious of writing for a readership that mostly does not share this language context. But even before I was even writing for a heavily-Western readership, I've always done it as a matter of course, because it's a class marker and a social weapon. As I mentioned in that essay linked above, *the sword* is the Sinhala phrase for the ability to speak English. Where swordplay was concerned, we weren't taught to respect our Englishes equally. What I *was* taught—and what multilingual people here and everywhere have been taught for generations—is that there is the good English, to which we must aspire and whose mastery opens up the world, and there is the bad, broken English, which is risible at best.

This idea persists (both at large and in my head) despite attempts to legitimize World Englishes, because the gulf between

the sharp sword and the broken sword comes from power dynamics rooted generations-deep in class and empire. When I find myself holding the broken sword, I still translate myself out of it—most of the time. One of the reasons I love Kuzhali Manickavel's prose so much is that she taught me I didn't have to.

The historian in "Ruin's Cure" is speaking the temporally-local Sinhala for the most part (which would be mostly unintelligible to a modern speaker), but can't help using words from the future (in both Sinhala and English) to talk about things that haven't been invented yet, like clocks and nations. On the other hand, some things must translate anyway. A slogan of the late twencen Lankan nationalist movement is රට, ජාතිය, ආගම, and every one of those words is complicated to translate because they have meant some very different things across history. Rata is now usually translated as *country*, but it used to mean something more like kingdom or realm, because territory was bounded by allegiances rather than geographical demarcations. Jathiya is usually given as *nation* or perhaps *race* depending on context, but before nationhood and race were invented, it meant a social category and community you were born into, probably linked to some particular occupation, role, or function, at least sometimes with violently policed boundaries—how exactly all this translates to *caste* in the modern sense is itself complicated further by the intervening imperialist gaze, which had a great deal of interest in the rigid stratification of society. And agama is now generally *faith*, the belief in and practice of religion, where it once referred specifically to traditions of transmission of canonical texts. The slogan is a catalogue of, as it were, coordinate systems for putting humans into hierarchical, bordered groups: at least in this sense, these words haven't really changed at all. The cruel young prince would have understood it very well. The wise old king too, for that matter.

Is it fair to say this story is in some ways about how the West has colonized even the Sri Lankan past via the agency of Sri Lankan intellectuals? Is the historian's act a revolutionary act?

Much of Lankan nationalist thought is structurally or symptomatically Western despite its self-image to the contrary. This includes both direct and indirect consequences of Western occupations. For example, British sodomy laws, long since repealed in the metropole, still uphold institutionalized homophobia in the former occupied territories. In much the same way, contemporary Buddhism is something that was effectively (re)invented in the late 19th century as an already proto-fascist anticolonial movement, because it relied heavily on a base of British racecraft to construct identity—I'm borrowing Barbara and Karen Fields' very helpful word here to describe the way that the Lankan triad of Sinhala/Tamil/Muslim identities were reified, legitimized, and reinforced by the British imperial government during the same period, through everything from census categories to quotas for political representation. These are conversations that have not yet been had here, or at least not loudly enough to be heard. It's been commonplace for over a century now, this talking about the Sinhala jathiya and meaning something other than just language-speakers, something *racial*, something in the blood. There is nothing in the blood, of course, but people keep pouring it out anyway, as if to make sure.

As for the historian's act, I called it treachery earlier; I do read it as more treasonous than revolutionary. I find the idea of traitorousness more interesting and closer to hand, as it were, since we're all living deep in the neoliberal ascendancy. The traitor is the unreliable cog, the biter of the hand that feeds. The historian acts on his own, at the last moment, after having spent his whole life working on the other side. He has no movement and no programme. So it's hard to see him as a revolutionary figure. But he *is* a traitor, at least, which seems like the least he could do. He throws his body on the gears and the wheels of the machine that he himself had upheld and enforced until that very moment. He is also probably a failure, since this is a time travel story, and any denouement can be edited away.

Ahimaz Rajessh

2018 August

We are particularly interested in influences and inspirations that do not come out of the orthodox speculative fiction canon. Might you say a few words on such influences in "versus/and" and in your work in general?

I named Micmeg after Micromégas because the character, although not at first but later upon reflection, seemed to be an inversion of Voltaire's character. Apart from that, the parenthetical theorizing portion was inspired by one of Tamil writer Lakshmi Manivannan's stories from his collection called Vellai Palli Vivagaram (White-Lizard Incident) where it's a psychoanalytical/feminist critique of sorts of the very story that's being told. Also the planet-devouring being idea came from a conversation I had years ago with an Austrian comic-book nerd friend where he mentioned something of that sort from a comic book that I never read.

I'd like to believe I'm someone who avoids influences but some things leave a lasting impression upon the mind, especially the concepts encountered in books read at an young age, that later pop up in your work unnoticed. C. S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet*, which I hope isn't in the orthodox speculative fiction canon, comes to mind. Then of course there's Voltaire and some Vertigo comic-book titles by the British Invasion writers. Also there's the literary influences ranging from Kafka to Borges, and lately Eduardo Galeano and the Tamil poets Atmanam and Yavanika Sriram, but I try not to allow approaches and techniques of modernist literature seep into my speculative fiction; those that I deem to be too done-to-death or self-defeating, while at the same time not being entirely dismissive of them.

Your writing is exuberant. It rather exceeds one's expectation of what is possible with the English language. How would you characterize your relationship with English? Do you write in other languages as well?

Once I received a rejection stating that my "command of written English is insufficient for publication." It was one of those favorite stories of mine, sort of personal, which was anyway eventually published by another zine and nominated for an anthology, too. Thinking about it now, I think that editor was spot-on in that I do not command or lord over the language; I just allow it go wherever it wants to, not to the extent that it's total chaos and out of hand but to the point where it's kind of a Sonic Youthesque organized chaos, which I understand some might find off-putting. The jouissance I derived out of reading *The Man Who Was Thursday* nearly two decades ago is still somehow deeply embedded in me, I think, and that was the book that made me want to write in the first place. Then there was Candide. Maybe I sort of want to replicate that feeling of joy if not in the story, through its telling at least. Then there's the self-imposed insistence on trying to be original, unconscious influences aside, not giving in to imitations of any sort. It's okay, as it were, to write "badly" but it isn't okay to write unoriginally.

I've also written poems and done some translation in my mother tongue, Tamil, but that's a recent activity since only lately have I been reading Tamil literature. I was educated in Tamil medium until high school so when I wanted to learn written English, far away from home, and this was five years after I began conversing almost fluently in English in a city, I sat down every day with a King James Bible accompanied by a Tamil Bible, a dictionary and a thesaurus for over a year. It then went from Blake and Chesterton to Voltaire and *His Dark Materials*, then Vertigo comics, *Ubik*, *Neuromancer*, *Wild Seed* and so on, just to mention some, not to mention the movies and music from the West that precede my years of reading. There's also the literature "proper" that I wanted to "unlearn" in order to remain non-orthodox and it took quite a lot of struggle to step

out of the monomythical narrative zone. I should as well mention the severe corporal punishments that I underwent at home learning English as a second language. It's considered vital to be proficient in English. But I would learn it only while being on my own, on my own terms, outside home because I do not come from an anglophone family or community and in the town and at home we speak only in Tamil. On the other hand, during college years, instead of learning the subjects, I learned to speak English because Mangalore city had many LD theaters that played a Hollywood movie a day and we were frequenting them almost every day, and my college mates being non-Tamils from the neighboring states and I choosing to strictly converse with them only in English. From Mangalore (my years of watching movies) I moved to Delhi for a Masters degree (years of reading theist literature) and then to Hyderabad for work (years of atheist, transgressive literature and dissent), now I'm back in hometown (years of reading and writing in Tamil and English). Somewhere in there, during and after the atheist years, there's also my trying-to-be-Hindu years. By the way, I was trained to be a physical therapist but ended up working in the field of medical transcription. While in Hyderabad, I got a desktop because torrents were a thing, which meant having access to vast amounts of music, movies, comics and other reading and multimedia material. That's also where I started a blog to cut my teeth on creative writing in English. So, it's been quite a ride. At the same time, being away from home and becoming a self-made individual meant being rootless. Some might say being rootless is transcendence but transcendence is claptrap and yet another illusory category if being rootless doesn't immediately lead to immanent permanence, and becoming by itself cannot mean much when being is taken out of the equation or always held in suspension. I'm neither a global individual nor a local individual as that's something I can never be because those are illusory categories; I'm rather a local and global person at once who just happens to think bilingually. If English made me rootless then, now in a world where the land-grabbing, Anthropocene-causing corporations are self-appointed environmentalists, Tamil makes

me rootless, too, because the oppressors are both without and within, a rather tight spot for anyone to be in, and language, be it any language, is a tool for both the oppressor and the oppressed.

It seems to me that very little in your writing is static or fixed; things are constantly moving about, changing form, inflating and deflating, perspectives shift, words unravel. Could you venture a word or two on why this might be the case?

The story "versus / and" as it is now stemmed out of a drabble that I wrote which then over time became a nano, a micro and so on, and at each juncture I thought it to be complete from one submission to next. I'd even sent out the 1,000-word version a few times as a flash after it had become 1,200 words. This story itself, thus, in the process of its being created has been, strangely enough, inflating and deflating all along.

Things can be in flux even amid all the dismay. There's the external motion, and in the absence of external motion, there's again the internal motion. To be in constant motion is to be alive and to thrive. Joanna Newsom sings a song like a siren, hitting upon all sorts of vocal ranges, yet the song is full of life. The story (the content) can be tragedic yet the telling (the form) can sing. Even when the body is at rest, the mind thinks, and if the mind isn't thinking, it is dreaming. Even in the absence of dreams, beside other internal motions, the lungs breathe and the hearts beat. I'm of the opinion that not just music but art in general and writing in particular tries to imitate beating hearts and breathing motions. Then there's the process of aging, information overload, irony as therapy, acquiring of knowledge, shifting of perspectives, seeking truths, honesty, resistance, the process of all sorts of dying and above all there's the celebration of life. To put it in a nutshell, writing is an expression of a living self. I think I sing the body terrorized. I may be singing the body that's shocked and awed.

Voltaire, Blake, Lewis, Chesterton, all writers deeply concerned with religion, albeit from very different perspectives.

Plus the King James and Tamil Bibles, and you briefly mention your own religious trajectory. Where does religion sit in your work?

We aren't the center of the universe, and the good news is that our Gods aren't either. I view organized religions, and especially the state-approved religions, as fictions, that is, grand narratives. Lately, I've realized how important it is not to parade religious ideas or symbols of a once colonized region when contesting a colonizer narrative particularly if the formerly colonized state itself is now an oppressor locally, elsewhere or both, even if that particular state is a so-called secular state, clinging to that religion. All sorts of oppressor narratives, whether they are historical or religious, deserve to be contested within and without literature. The existence of God isn't something to be disproved or he/she isn't someone to be searched for either. There's too much at stake as it is. Hence, I can take no prisoners when it comes to religion. So, if religion or a religious symbol shows up in my work, it will either be in a twisted form, and if that isn't the case, it's likely because it's a symbol of the oppressed with whom I must take a stance. What appears at first to be a Pushpak Vimana soon turns out to be a Fata Morgana, it emerges suddenly that Jesus isn't everyone's savior, Indra's net happens to be in the control of the corporate-government nexus and so on.

In other interviews for this issue both Vajra Chandrasekera and Benjanun Sriduangkaew framed their answers to my questions of language and translation and style in more overtly political terms while you have emphasized jouissance. Could you say a few words about the relation of the political to the pleasurable in your work?

Since I've otherwise been getting myself overly politicized lately I was trying to be implicit here about the political was all. What's creative writing if not the unbinding of the chains and traps of the oppressors' orthodox, avant-garde or whatever narratives. I do not have to, and no one should, borrow a

perspective or buy a narrative just because the text has been merely pleasurable or, as they say, simply divine. At the same time, what's pleasurable can be cathartic, provocative, radically political and so on. In ancient Tamil literature we have *agam* literature (interior or personal) and *puram* literature (exterior and political), both well marked and anthologized as such. Likewise, in modern Tamil literature we happen to have these two schools of thought, the personal literature and the political literature, between which only the personal literature is claimed to be literary because it supposedly takes aesthetics and in turn jouissance seriously. The political literature is by and large claimed to supposedly lack literary aesthetics. At the same time, what is considered literary is accused, though just by a few, of lacking in the political (while it may contain the personal-political, it isn't political enough, that is, it's trapped in the interior, helplessly navel-gazing). The texts that connect with me more are the ones that tend to blend both the interior and the exterior, not because I've been schooled regarding these distinctions, their merits or the lack thereof but because that's what I perceived literature must be from the get-go, spontaneously. Thus, I guess, that sensibility of blending the personal and the political bleeds into my writing naturally, not having to choose one sensibility over the other or lean toward what's considered as literary or high art. Provided it isn't just about dying, death or mere dystopian doomsaying, what is political can be radically pleasurable.

Benjanun Sriduangkaew

2018 August

Do you deliberate on how you will write a story or does the style emerge from the process of writing it? And could you identify what the antecedents of your style more generally are?

For me it's very organic, partly because I don't always plan out my short stories—I tend to start with a single line or paragraph, or an image, and go from there. I find it works out for short fiction; I think it was Nick Mamatas who said that short stories can be held of a piece in your head, and I find that a good approach toward the form. When there aren't a lot of moving parts, it's easier to let the style surface on its own. By and large though, regardless of what the story calls for, I do find the sentence level of the prose important.

So a recent influence for me, outside of texts, is *NieR: Automata*—not just the specific narrative tropes or the story, but generally the mood and atmosphere and intent, a kind of cathartic, wasteland bleakness (which, as it happens, both "Parable" and "Demonkind" probably reflect somewhat). In terms of writers, I read a lot of China Miéville but wouldn't say my style is very much like his, and good nature writing has been a huge boon in refining my prose. A friend recommended me Helen Macdonald's *H is For Hawk,* and reading Helen Oyeyemi has done a lot for me.

I am curious about how your stories would seem in another language. Do you write in Thai? Do you write *SF* in Thai? How

do you perceive the relation of writing in English to ongoing Anglo-American imperialism?

I don't write in Thai, partly because English does have rather more reach—not a lot of people learn Thai, and it is a tremendously difficult, complex language. Meantime, if you want to be able to speak across diasporas, and across nationalities, by necessity you'll have to do so in English. It's not ideal, but there's something interesting in considering multiple Englishes; there's Hong Kong English, closest to home, with its own nuances and slang and cadence. I think it's more useful to conceptualize subaltern people speaking English not as merely a product of imperialism (though at root it is), but adaptation and making a new English of your own.

You'll probably notice I mostly write in present tense—a choice I'm sure many readers find annoying (for reasons I don't quite understand; to me it is pure aesthetic)—and which I've made because in Thai, you don't conjugate verbs to inflect chronology. Writing in present tense is as close to Thai as I can get in English, if that makes sense.

Where would you locate the political in your writing?

I'll avoid joking that everything is political! When it comes to my writing, I think that it's crucial to have something to say, but if I want to say that thing plainly, I'd write an essay. With fiction it pays to have a little subtlety, and though some of my stories are more overt ("The Universe as Vast as Our Longings" wears its intent on its sleeve) about what they have to say, I do like to think they're still pleasing to read. A story should fulfill stylistic as well as polemical requirements, and I do like to deliver a satisfying narrative shape. I'm very preoccupied by the trajectory of a story's catharsis, actually, and I prioritize that a great deal.

Your *NieR: Automata* comment is intriguing. One of the things about your writing that made it seem so fresh to me when I first came across it was that it was post-canonical,

you weren't in a conversation with the SF shelf of a library in a provincial town in some white settler colony; you seemed to be engaging with science-fictional and speculative fiction via games.

So in my SFF reading I've largely avoided the canon, I've never read Asimov or Clarke, though of course I've read Butler. Some of the media I consume reference the English-language canon, but in most recent memory the reference—in *Psycho-Pass*—was blessedly to Frantz Fanon rather than, I don't know, Lovecraft. Which I haven't read either, now that I think about it. *Automata* does some very interesting things with familiar SF motifs, partly because I think it's not in conversation with Asimov or whatnot either. So that's a huge draw, to engage with media that themselves didn't arise from the American canon and which treat the American canon as irrelevant to either their process, their marketing, or their audience-seeking.

My influences lean away from textual media partly because, very simply put, I don't have the skills to make something like *NieR: Automata* or *Masquerada* or *Transistor*. These works are collaborative, a whole created by musicians, voice actors, writers, graphic artists, coders; it is easier to be awed when it looks like magic. (Not to say that it *isn't* magic, because all three games are, in very different ways. But it's not the kind of magic available to me, so to speak.) And I find that when you move away from the *Call of Duty* installments and such, narrative and even gaming formats become much more daring. *Automata* leaves a lot of mysteries unsolved, and even its most optimistic ending is an open-ended one that still asks whether tragedy is inevitable. It incorporates different modes of play into its story—platformer segments, shooter segments—that are integral to the experience rather than just switching things around for the sake of it. In a sort of adjacent way, I suppose "The Five Secret Truths of Demonkind" is as close as I could get to portraying the brutal, awful climbing of the machine towers in *Automata*? Albeit to a pretty different end. I'd love to experiment with style modes more in the future, preferably in a longer form, and with

story-puzzles. I'm not sure what form that will take yet, but one day I will.

Another thing to like: *Automata* and *Transistor* don't just end on bleak notes—well, depends on whether you think committing suicide to enter an afterlife where all your friends and loved ones have gone is happy in the case of *Transistor*—but they're both conclusive. This is it. No sequels, no series, no trilogies. At most, there'd be the same setting but completely different characters and different stories. That's very refreshing compared to certain fantasy books that go on for ten, fifteen, even twenty-six tomes.

Might you say something more about the politics of your style? Or style and politics in general?

One difficulty is that, because I've read a great deal from white western authors, some influence inevitably leaks through: the imagination is colonized, and that's very difficult to dispel or escape. But I find a conscious effort to decolonize important, and when choosing whose comfort to prioritize—what kind of reader you assume is your primary audience and who must be catered to—it is very much an act of intentionality. I don't include a glossary for any non-English words in my fiction, and if a character is called in-text by their Mandarin and Cantonese names (romanized and pronounced quite differently) I'm not going to interrupt a paragraph to say, this is the same name in Cantonese, this is also that name but in Mandarin. *Winterglass* has a minor character who's an allusion to a Chinese epic, you either recognize the name or you don't. After all, when a writer names a character Artemis, nobody needs an explanation that it's the name of a Greek goddess. No glossaries, no footnotes, no concession.

On to the politics of style. An overt example: how the CIA manipulated premier American workshops to produce propaganda. It's an interesting read, and also sobering in how it's affected writing since and publishing. (Eric Bennett, "How Iowa Flattened Literature," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2014)

Do you notice that a certain kind of reader—and writer—endorses Strunk and White as holy scripture? They want you to "omit needless words" and to avoid using "ten-dollar" words when small ones would do. It's anti-intellectual and conformist and zombifying, but importantly deviation from such sterile requirements is primarily permitted to privileged—usually white—writers. That is, when a privileged writer turns out something stylistically unusual or which has long sentences, they'll be praised for their daring and verve and cleverness. When marginalized writers do it, why, we're just trying too hard "to impress" (or our command of English is questioned if we're from the global south). Very presumptuous, I think, to imagine that marginalized authors write to impress the (presumably majority, hegemonic) reader whereas privileged writers are pure artists whose work stands on its own, intellectual pillars that they are. There's also a sense of outrage from some readers when they read work which challenges them linguistically: a clear impression that they've been made to feel stupid and must accordingly lash out. If someone documented these reactions, they could probably write an essay called "How to Suppress Marginalized Writing."

Sofia Samatar

2019 January

You often seem to be writing about the impossibility of the bourgeois family. There is in the background somehow a haunting triangulation of mother—father—child, a phantom of happiness.

I think there's something to it. I'm very interested in the power of bad attachments—how what hurts us can come to feel like home. This certainly happens in families, where people can be deeply attached to those who treat them badly. And it happens on a larger, cultural level, too, where we can have longings for things that aren't good for us or anyone else, like an expensive car or a particular size of body. Could the bourgeois family itself be one of those things that isn't good for us, that we've become attached to over time? I think this is one of the questions in my work, and maybe it creates that sense of something haunting the characters, of an impossible happiness.

Space, fields, zones (of incandescence and otherwise) seem more important in your work than time or the tick-tick-tick of plot and narrative. Time, in so far as memory and anticipation are relevant, is important, but not as critical to framing your stories as space. Is this a fair statement?

Wow, I like it—which probably means it's not entirely false! I definitely tend to get frustrated with plot, at least the way it's usually approached in novels—what Virginia Woolf called "this appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner." I believe in skipping events. If I'm reading a book,

and the author leaps over plot points to get to the arresting moment or phrase, I'm so grateful. So, yeah, I guess I would say I work more in narrative space than regular, linear time.

However, I have to admit I've gotten more into plot lately, because I'm interested in pleasure, and let's face it, a strong plot gives readers a great deal of pleasure. Recently I wrote a story called "Hard Mary," published in *Lightspeed*, that makes more use of a swiftly-unfolding, linear plot than most of my stories, and I like that aspect of it (it's about some Amish girls who find a robot).

I'm also curious about narratives that shatter plot and manage to maintain energy and drive. What is the plot of Bolaño's *Antwerp*? I was talking to a writer friend recently who said that rather than plot, she tends to think about suspense. I really like that. Even in a story that emphasizes space over time, suspense is crucial.

Might you say a word or two about alienation or nostalgia in your work?

Both are so important. I think the sense of alienation is the reason I'm a fantasy writer. What is alienation but nostalgia for a place you've never been? So you write that non-existent place.

When I started writing, that was my main goal. It's why I created Olondria: to have a place where nobody would ask me where I was from. It would be obvious I belonged. (I see we're back to the notion of literature as space here...) At first, I thought of it almost as a cure, like once I'd done this, brought this realm to life, I'd have a permanent home. This didn't work—though not for the obvious reason, not because literature can't be life. Rather, it failed because I loved the project so much. I realized that alienation isn't a disease to be cured; on the contrary, it's a rich, even beautiful feeling. I wasn't trying to get rid of my alienation at all, I was reveling in it. And I'm still doing that today.

Writing, alienation and pleasure. We haven't talked much about politics. In a recent interview with Ahimaz Rajessh, he suggested that what is political can also be radically pleasurable. How does politics or ideology intersect with reveling in alienation? Is there a way of writing politics that is pure pleasure rather than something didactic?

Certainly. In fact you can argue (and many people have) that the political is most effective when it's pleasurable. Then you can decide what to do with that argument! Are you into the cozy pleasures of heteronormative traditions imprinted onto a nation depicted as a big happy family, with a father at its head, intent on keeping out the "foreign intrusions" of immigration? Ok. But you could also embrace a pleasure that transgresses all that. The hallucinations of dreaming, where everything is unhinged, where the mind opens up. The joys an alien can take in feeling completely outside. The attraction of the monstrous. The cunning of tricksters. The secret, exciting alliances, like the ones between children and animals in fairytales.

How useful is the idea of *genre* to you in your writing? (Or is it at all?) And for that matter, how do you feel about genre as a social fact—an institution that shapes, organizes, markets and distributes words?

Here is a brief outline of my relationship to genre over time:

a) I love genre categories! Thanks to them, I can always find my stuff in the bookstore and that's awesome because all I read is fantasy and science fiction.

b) I hate genre categories because people don't put things on the right shelves. What is Borges doing over there in literary fiction? Bulgakov? Kathryn Davis? People are hiding things from me in the bookstore, refusing to put fantasy books in the Fantasy section. I have been betrayed.

c) Now that I'm a published writer, I realize that people look down on me for writing genre fiction. I find myself in a box, only welcome in places located inside that box, like conventions or

panels on SFF. But my fiction owes as much to Proust as it does to Tolkien. Genre is bullshit. It's not for readers and writers. It's just for sales.

d) Although genre categories, as a marketing strategy, can't entirely be trusted, these forms are more than just advertising. They're also literary modes, codes, atmospheres, and communities. Pretending they don't exist, and that all writing is Just Writing, is not only false, it's boring. Genre is good to think with and fun to play with. I love genre categories!

How does the idea or experience of the divine or the sacred figure into your work? I was almost overwhelmed by the gods of Olondria.

Oh, thank you! I loved writing those gods. It was one of my first steps in making the world: creating the pantheon. So much grew out of those deities, as I shaped them—not just institutions and rituals, but place names, verbal expressions, and histories. Because I was world-building, I really got to thinking about geography and the sacred, and how the stories we tell transform *space* into *place*. Space is neutral; place is named. Myths and religious practices create holy places, breathing life into geography, entangling human identities with the physical features of the world around them. This is a wonderful process and deeply important. It has all kind of implications in terms of human relationships with the rest of nature. I often think about how to cultivate that kind of feeling so that it extends not just to particular places but to the planet as a whole, to every part of it. "Loose thy shoe from off thy foot, for thou standest in the weeds beside the highway."

The flip side to this, of course, is that when places are made holy, they become battlegrounds. I thought a lot about that, too.

Finally, there's the individual experience of the sacred, which is attached to the communal, place-making process, but not identical with it. In *A Stranger in Olondria*, the main character has a spiritual experience he almost can't handle, can't explain to anyone around him. It's isolating, devastating. In *The Winged*

Histories, too, there are supernatural trials and transformations people have to go through alone. For me, those experiences—so ecstatic and traumatic—are figures for art. That's how I talk about writing.

It is interesting to think about the origins of the divine involved in the play of world-building And it is interesting to think about writing as play altogether—an antidote, perhaps, to the dead hand of professionalism. But that's me projecting. For you, what is the relationship of play and trauma to professionalism and product?

I like your projections! I mean, I really feel this. I'm always trying to figure out how to feel good and finish things at the same time. You know? Closing things off doesn't feel good to me. Mastery feels awful. Professionalism makes me feel dead. Sometimes I'll go for a long time producing nothing, because I want to write what feels urgent, intimate, alive, and of course that changes from day to day, so I'll be working on eight or ten different projects nobody's ever seen or heard of and finishing nothing. And then suddenly I'll panic, thinking, this is chaos, I'm going to die without publishing another thing ever if I can't buckle down and finish something! Or—I've got a deadline!! And then I'll drive myself to finish. The back-and-forth between these two states is no fun, it really stresses me out, but I don't know what to do about it. It seems to be how I work.

Namwali Serpell

2019 January

Your afronaut piece in *The New Yorker* was a revelation, because without saying anything out loud it used a very careful and precise historical voice to link postcolonial Zambia to, not just the conceptual extravagances of Afrofuturism, but to the glorious political and aesthetic ferment of the *The Black Atlantic*. Its satirical dryness also reminded me a little of Martine Syms' "The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto." Could you discuss how you see satire, realism, and either science fiction in general or Afrofuturism in particular, related to each other? And how do these relations play out in your own work?

When I first learned about Edward Mukuka Nkoloso's Zambian Space Programme, my responses echoed those of his contemporaries. Like journalists from the west, I thought he was a "crackpot"; like people on the ground in the newly-minted Zambia, I worried he had just embarrassed us with his outlandish ideas about getting to the moon before Russia and America. But then I read an Op-Ed he wrote at the time and certain lines stood out to me, like: "Specially trained spacegirl Mata Mwambwa [sic], two cats (also specially trained) and a missionary will be launched in our first rocket. But I have warned the missionary he must not force Christianity to the people if they do not want it." I was like, "Oh! Wait. Is this an elaborate satire of colonialism?" My *New Yorker* essay describes my journey to find out the answer. I once met an artist who reminded me that Zambians' sense of irony is very subtle: "We don't have a *yes* and a *no*. We have two *yeses*, and one of them means *no*."

There is a long black tradition of this kind of satire. I suspect

it's the result of two historical aspects of black existence. One is the need for secrecy during colonialism and slavery. To misspeak is to put your body at risk of punishment, torture, death. So you learn to speak in code—you sing slave songs with double meanings, you braid escape routes into your hair, you learn to "signify," a technique Henry Louis Gates, Jr. traces back to African folktales. The other aspect of black existence that yields irony is what W.E.B. Du Bois called double consciousness: being forced to view yourself through a split lens: from the inside as a self, a subject; and from the outside as whatever object the world has named you to be: nigger, kaffir, monkey, etc. These two forms of doubleness, I think, make for incredible works of art, because the layers are built in. And they intensify the form of irony that Charles Baudelaire attributed to the philosopher, which he called dédoublement: a man who laughs at himself as he falls, "a man who has acquired by habit the power to double himself rapidly and to witness as a disinterested spectator phenomena involving his own ego."

Many of the texts in my Black Science Fiction class delectate in satirical/philosophical doubleness. I teach Syms' manifesto, which is a dark delight; George Schuyler's hilarious *Black No More* (1931), the premise of which is a machine that turns black people white; and Mat Johnson's *Pym* (2011), which lovingly excoriates Edgar Allen Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838). The center of the course is Sun Ra's *Space is the Place* (1974), set in Oakland and Saturn, and in some ways the origin text of what Mark Dery would call Afrofuturism in 1993. Nkoloso and Ra had a lot in common. They were both well-educated students and, later, autodidacts. They were both drafted into white armies to fight white wars, which turned them into black radicals. They both wore elaborate costumes—helmets and capes—and considered the rich darkness of the universe itself to be a place of and for blackness. They both refused to explain or relinquish their double hold on a fantastical origin story and on a futuristic fantasy about sending black people to outer space. And they never broke character—which makes it impossible to know whether they believed that they were in fact characters at all.

In my depiction of Nkoloso and his Afronauts in my novel *The Old Drift*, I tried to maintain this sense of doubleness—the very human ability to contain contradictory beliefs and feelings. And in my science fiction writing as a whole, I try to be both scientifically plausible and satirically outlandish. Bothness is something that black art can convey—but also teach—to the world.

You reviewed both *Black Panther* and *Sorry To Bother You*. Might you, not just as a critic but as a producer of speculative lit yourself, venture a direct comparison of the two?

Oh, interesting—I actually hadn't thought about the two in relation to each other yet. They're so different! I have thought more about *Sorry to Bother You* in connection with another recent favorite of mine, *Get Out*, which I reviewed as a sci-fi film for *Public Books*. All three films are interested in splitting the black person in two: as a literalized double consciousness in Peele's film; as both human and animal in Riley's; and as African/American in *Black Panther*'s anti-hero Killmonger. All three are funny, too, and many of the jokes work on multiple levels, not just in the Shakespearean sense of gags for the groundlings and puns for the Queen, but also in their double address to black and white audiences. This fits with what I say above about Afrofuturism and dédoublement.

The way *Sorry to Bother You* and *Black Panther* handle place is diametrically opposed. Think about how they depict Oakland: *Black Panther* ends with a dissatisfying model whereby Wakandans will build a center for "social outreach" and "science and information exchange." This liberal gentrification is precisely what *Sorry to Bother You* dramatizes and troubles for us when Cassius's garage apartment transforms before our eyes into a beautiful loft in downtown Oakland. The mishmash of "African" accents in the Marvel movie sounds even worse when we consider the brilliant auditory experiment in *Sorry to Bother You*: having white actors ventriloquize the "white voices" of black characters. And of course the politics of Riley's film are much more radical: a multicultural Marxist revolution vs. a collusion

between Wakandan armies and the CIA. I do think the diasporic production of *Black Panther* exceeds the limitations of its plot, however—there is something truly Pan-African about seeing these actors, these cultures, these forms of dress and address, all together on screen. *Sorry to Bother You* is sharper but also narrower, aesthetically speaking. And each offers a differently insufficient fantasy of black freedom. *Black Panther* imagines a world where blackness is central but just happens to dovetail with western forms of economic and political power. *Sorry to Bother You* critiques assimilation but ends up subsuming blackness into a multiracial class coalition.

The last decade or so has seen increasing engagement between people trained in the academy as critics and people who consume and produce genre fiction according to different sets of rules. When you talk about "lay readers" and new forms of literary criticism I am curious how your critical interests and projects intersect with your genre interest—not just as a critic and writer but as a consumer of pleasurable things.

I recently went to see a movie with a couple of friends. As we walked in, I said I had looked it up on Rotten Tomatoes and it was 94% fresh for critics' reviews, and 74% fresh for audience response. "I don't know which one I am," I joked. (I didn't like the film very much, so perhaps that's the answer!) But in general, my feeling about this split in me corresponds to the moment in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, where Jekyll discovers that Hyde has left obscene marginalia in his (their?) books. I'm not sure which is which, but that feels right to me: the artist and the critic in me speak to each other, sometimes rudely, through books—and I'm not exactly privy to the conversation. I tell my students to read without a pencil sometimes—to maintain a sense of curiosity and pleasure—but I don't say they ought to do that only with certain kinds of books. You can apply these different lens to anything: I read Robert Ludlum's *The Bourne Identity* with a pencil to teach last semester but I read Elena Ferrante's entire *Neapolitan Quartet* without one.

I love to know absolutely nothing about a film or a novel before I experience it—something that, as an absentminded immigrant, I've experienced a lot, to wondrous effect: with *Lolita*, *Under the Skin, Dogtooth, The Changeling*, *Shirkers*, *Ten Little Soldiers*, among many others. My friend recently mistook two authors for each other and read a novel about a horse thief detective while expecting it to be a science fiction dystopia—up to the very last pages, where she imagined a twist would emerge (the horses are androids?!). She described it as such a marvelous strangeness that I want to replicate it for myself! All this is to say, there are many more ways to experience works of art than we tend to imagine. Divisions like critics and lay readers might be handy (especially for scholars) but they are limited.

Your pieces "Account," "Be the Flower in the Gun," "Colors / Turquoise," "The Book of Faces," even the Nabokov essay in *The Believer* are, to some degree, lists. Could you say a word or two about lists versus narrative, or lists and narrative, or just lists?

List on lists:

1. I do make a lot of lists in my life, on my Notes feature and in my email drafts!
2. Some of my works seem list-like only because the forms they mimic are list-like: a bank statement, a course catalogue, a Facebook newsfeed. So this may be a side effect of my more general interest in formal experimentation + the panoply of lists in contemporary media.
3. I write prose and lists may be the closest I'll ever get to writing poetry.
4. In all things, I like a strong sense of structure with great internal variation.
5. I love the word list, the sound of it and its three meanings, obliquely connected only by virtue of my associations (the drift of handwriting on a page, the fact that I enjoy them):
    - a numbered set of items
    - to lean to one side
    - to want or like.

In an earlier conversation you mentioned religion as an element of *The Old Drift*, especially with regard to speculative tech. More on this please.

I'm interested in science fiction's ability to predict the future, but also in the inklings of science fiction that litter the past. When I was researching microdrones for *The Old Drift*, I stumbled across a bizarro website that claimed that insectile drones like RoboBees had been prophesied by the Book of Revelation. And it turns out that you can indeed find this wild passage in the *King James Bible*:

> And the shapes of the locusts *were* like unto horses prepared unto battle; and on their heads *were* as it were crowns like gold, and their faces *were* as the faces of men. And they had hair as the hair of women, and their teeth were as *the teeth* of lions. And they had breastplates, as it were breastplates of iron; and the sound of their wings *was* as the sound of chariots of many horses running to battle. And they had tails like unto scorpions, and there were stings in their tails: and their power *was* to hurt men five months. (Revelation 9:7–10)

This confusion of the entomological and the technological is deeply appealing to me. It became crucial to one story arc in my novel: Nkoloso, who attended seminary, teaches Matha Mwamba to read using *The King James Bible*, then trains her to become an Afronaut and a political revolutionary. She conveys what she knows to her grandson Jacob, a techno-wiz compound kid who builds his own microdrones with scrap material, and eventually, with resources from a shady military officer.

Drones at any size imply sight and flight—both of which are abilities that humans aspire to have at great *range*. The sublimity of this biblical passage—its vehemence and grand beauty—thus also dictated the imagery and tone of my depictions of this particular sci-fi innovation in the novel (there are two other major ones—I ignored Wells's Law!—but they carry a very different register).

Finally, this passage lent itself beautifully to the overarching frame of the novel's narrators. I won't spoil, except to say that, just as Afrofuturism often blends history (e.g. Egyptian gods and themes of enslavement) and the future (e.g. spaceships and androids), *The Old Drift* was my attempt to synthesize the very, very old with the very, very new.

Tim Maughan

2019 July

In Brendan C. Byrne's reading list (this issue) he suggests you are more fully ensconced in the tradition of social realism than SF *per se*. Comments?

Yeah, that sounds fair enough. I think that sweet spot where the two can overlap is what has always excited me most about science fiction, it's something you can glimpse in new wave writers like Ballard and Brunner, who were experimenting with both I think. And even Gibson. Cyberpunk got associated with a fetishization of violence and body modification, but actually what originally attracted me to it was how real it felt, how it seemed to be willingly grappling with life in urban spaces, how subcultures work, how global and corporate economics impact people etc.

What you are saying about cyberpunk is interesting but is there in cyberpunk, and Infinite Detail as well, a centering of the narrative in very specifically situated technological elite subcultures—however alienated they are. Might you discuss the relation between the tech savvy heroes of such texts and the masses of people for whom such technologies are, as at least one character in your book says, "magic." How does one represent such relations between experts and say, the children in the spice factory, without being condescending?

I'd certainly agree cyberpunk centers the narrative that way, but I'm saddened if you see Infinite Detail doing it to the same extent. One of my core aims when writing it was to attempt to address that imbalance, as with most of my short fiction

from the last few years. Frank the canner certainly isn't of the tech elite, neither are Tyrone or Mary who are both struggling to come to terms with the technological scraps they've been left, and in Mary's case she's navigating that line between understanding and the portrayal of tech as mystical and magic. Grids also, who understands it better than he lets on, and very clearly demonstrates by the end of the book that he's aware of the power imbalance it creates. I mean, can you say Tyrone is part of a technological elite because he can program jungle on a broken Akai S950 sampler? Well I guess that would depend on how you define "elite" in this context. Perhaps you can call the roots of hip hop, house, and techno in inner city New York, Chicago, and Detroit "situated technological elite subcultures" too, but again it depends how you're defining "elite." Gibson's "the street finds its own use for things" isn't just a nice quote, it's the origin of the only interesting musical movements of the last 30 years. People hear that phrase and think of obnoxious cyberpunk hackers, but its much more appropriately applied to the history of working class, non-white, queer music subcultures.

I hope none of the book comes across as condescending, that would be awful. It would have been great to have explored the lives of the spice factory workers in detail, but there's always limits to what a novel can cover—plus I've written short fiction (Flyover Country, Special Economic Zone, Zero Hours, Four Days of Christmas etc.) about factory and service workers and their relationships to technology. I'm sad if it doesn't come across in this book, but I'm fairly comfortable with my efforts to address this TBH. And it's such a core theme to my work that it'll come up again, I'm very sure.

Again, with the relation with cyberpunk, and the technological unevenness in science fiction which is one of that subgenres hallmarks, could you say a little about some of the strategic Luddism that pops up in Infinite Detail. Any thoughts?

See the answer above, I think. Again so much of the book was aimed at addressing that unevenness that its hard to know

where to start. There's two struggles in the face of technological power that are happening in the book I think—a cultural and aesthetic one, as represented by Tyrone and Melody—and a technological one, represented by Rush and Dronegod$, who are taking that strategic Luddism angle you mention. Although I'm not sure how much strategy they really have. As a space the Croft represents both, or the swing from one to another—the artist colony that becomes a site of direct action. I'm fascinated in the whole idea of art as resistance, because it aesthetically and emotionally excites me when done well, but am always incredibly aware of its limits, to the point of often questioning its usefulness at all. I hope the book asks that question: when do you move from one to another, how bad does it have to be for you to stop talking and posturing and move into taking direct action?

I am curious about the role of time in your work as much as technology, both as an experience of a sort of persistent tedium and as an anticipation of apocalyptic change. Could you say a few words about how these two conceptualizations of it are related?

That's just the current way of being, isn't it? It's certainly my way of being, lol. I'm only joking a little bit, but yeah, that's how I feel pretty much everyday, and I think increasingly it's a common state of mind. That feeling you get from the never-ending scroll through twitter, or staring at the Guardian homepage, soaking in the headlines. The idea that everything is tedious, even when everything is happening at the same time. That something can happen that's completely shocking, but at the same time you're not surprised at all. Not so much future-shock as present-resignation. Just before I wrote this I was reading an article about an educational technology start-up that provides laptops to kids in schools, and when they plug their phones into them to charge them it sucks all their photos off and analyses them, sending reports to their teachers. One kid had got busted because he had a photo of himself taking bong hits on his phone. It's utterly terrifying and disgusting, but at the same time not at

all surprising. It's just another example of sitting around waiting for some massive collapse to come, while being resigned to and bored by how terrible it'll be. I feel like that a lot, and it's both consciously and subconsciously worked its way into my writing I guess.

In Infinite Details there is a compression of those two experiences of time into a single field—the anxious resignation of the present (although in the book that gets represented as the past) and the post-apocalyptic future, quite literally at times. It created a sense of fatality, of opportunities missed even as they arrived, both political and personal. Could you say a few words about that sort of perpetual melancholic nostalgia and regret? As philosophical outlook and/or writerly technique?

I wouldn't want to say too much beyond go and read Mark Fisher on hauntology, it's all there. His article on Burial is excellent, for example - this nostalgia for lost potential is very real for me, especially as I watch the multicultural dreams and political possibilities of the 1990s UK rave scene being relegated to history by the rise of the post-Brexit right. Almost certainly a large part of it is my age, my own middle aged nostalgia for my youth, but also there's a very real sense to me that the futures we imagined or where promised have turned to vapor, along with all futures. Arguably that happens for every generation, but it seems particularly dire now. Every counterculture dreams of seeing capitalism destroyed, and the generations below me may well see it, but I just hope and pray it happens on their own terms, and not because of fascism and/or environmental collapse.

Also, location: your writing is very much grounded in particular places yet the characters tend to read as dislocated and alienated.

I think a lot of my work is really looking about how that relationship—between people and spaces—is disrupted by external forces. How technology and economics force people to become

dislocated from their own spaces, to feel alienated within their own homes. So primarily we're talking about gentrification, but also the continued digitization of the real world, the way that the internet has broken free and colonized "real life." Which in itself is a form of gentrification, and the privatizing of public spaces and identities. It's very much there in *Infinite Detail*, with Frank the canner having his very localized occupation taken from him, without anyone even realizing, or him understanding. Or Melody and her fight to save the Barton Hill tower blocks. But it's also there in *Paintwork*, with 3Cube railing against billboard ads or the kids in *Havana Augmented* pushing back at the digital colonization of Cuba. So yeah, that dislocation and alienation within your own home space is a key thread to my fiction, I think, because it's such a defining quality of 21st century urban life. I spent 5 years living in Brooklyn, where it was happening right in front of your eyes, but honestly I see the same thing everywhere I go now.

I found sound rather than sight to be the critical descriptive sense in *Infinite Detail* and very important in how you showed location. Music and technological noises of course but especially the role of accents and how they were used to identify identity and origins, and how they could change and be manipulated. Your descriptions of accent and the words the characters use rather than their appearance were what marked key differences between them. Obviously Rush's tactical Englishness but Tyrone's patter, Anika's accent, and Mary's, the shift in the accent of the Finance Bro at the party were all wonderfully evocative touches that illuminated a great deal about social landscapes both pre and post. It felt at times that it was in sound rather than vision where the social realism of the text was located. Was this, I dunno, "aurality" deliberate or just something that happened?

Oh, very much deliberate. It comes from a bunch of places. Mainly wanting to always write a book that addressed the science fictionality of Black electronic music. And to me it's

impossible to separate the music I'm writing about—and love—from the heard environment, the two are entwined. The accent thing - well that's in part a particularly British thing about how people are judged and assigned a class based on how they speak. I wanted to explore that a bit for American audiences, who are given a very narrow exploration of British culture by the mainstream. For example people hear my accent and assume I'm Australian. It happens almost every week, even here in Canada. I didn't understand why at first, and then I realized it's because I'm English but I don't sound like Hugh Grant. Americans can only identify privileged, upper class British accents, because they're the only English people they're shown by movies and TV.

Returning to genre, what sorts of distinctions do you make between your fiction and nonfiction writing? Earnings aside.

Interesting I'd never considered them as genres before, at least not as formally as that. They're obviously very different. Although for me they both frequently stem from the same experience, or the same research. I'm doing less journalism now, because—well, it's a fucking mess. As anybody that even glances at it can tell. It's a disaster basically. But that's a whole different story, and one that's making up a large chunk of my next novel. But what the fiction allows me to do is explore stuff in a more emotional way, I guess. For example, the reporting I did from China about supply chains and manufacturing etc. for the BBC was very rewarding—I like writing for the BBC because I'm able to reach a very large audience to talk about topics many of them might not have considered before—but because of that and how their funding works they have very strict standards about supposed objectivity. So I'd come back and write these pieces, and it'd be cathartic to get it down, but it still wasn't enough. I still had this growing anger and frustration at what I had seen I needed to get out, or connections I needed to make between different things I'd seen that don't sit comfortably within the confines of journalistic articles. Which is where fiction comes in. I took

a lot of that anger and frustration and ranting and put it into *Infinite Detail*.

Rage and frustration. Not an optimistic book, but not quite hopeless either. The gangsta revolutionary seems a familiar figure, and the lack of planning by revolutionary ideologues, the distinction between black and urban revolutions and white and suburban, the establishment reaction. I found myself thinking about this as a post-revolutionary rather than a post-apocalyptic book.

Oh I agree, I never envisioned this as a post apocalyptic book at all—again it's an easy term for publishers and reviewers to apply to it—but to me it's all about revolutions and their failures and successes. What looks like apocalypse to one person or community looks like an opportunity—whether successful or not—to another. After spending time in the US it's very clear that the white middle class doesn't really understand revolutionary politics, it really *does* find it "easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism"—but I don't think that's true for many African Americans, who have been denied so much participation, who are still fighting for justice and civil rights, who still understand the importance of organization and community. That's why that final chapter is the way it is. It's very much meant to be a glimmer of hope at the end.

Related to this is your style, how would you characterize how it changes across forms?

I've had zero formal training in writing or literature since I was 16, so I'm not sure I have the language to answer this question really. Do I think about style? Yeah, of course, but not too much. Do I make conscious decisions about it? Yeah, of course, but not all the time. I guess I'm like one of those people that goes to art galleries occasionally without knowing anything about art and says "well I know what I like," lol. I think more accurately I know what works, or what I feel works in the moment. I certainly don't

consider market forces. At all. I could have written this book very differently I guess, if I'd wanted it to sell more, or become a TV series. I mean it's got teenage characters, but I don't think it's YA. It's got a high concept disaster at the centre—the collapse of the internet—but I don't think it's a "techno thriller" about the "dark web" or some shit. None of the main characters are a fucking cop, for example. I could have written it that way, a techno thriller about the collapse of the internet, one brave cyber cop up against shady terrorists—all that shit. I'm sure someone will come along and write something about the same premise in that style and it'll be a bestseller, get made into a movie staring The Rock. It's been interesting watching reviews and responses coming in - the critics have been largely very kind, and have complimented the style and characters, while some more traditional genre readers have said the opposite. A lot of the Goodreads reviews for example have complained about the characters being underdeveloped, and for a while I didn't really understand why. Then I got to thinking that maybe what they're looking for is origin stories and character arcs, things they're used to from movies and comics. And I understand the desire for those, but they're not real. Real people don't have character arcs, or simple motivations, or background stories to be revealed in a prequel - those things are inventions of the entertainment industry. They're marketable tropes. Real people are far more nebulous, complicated, they live far more in the moment and without definable meaning. They can't be summed up on a character sheet. As such it feels dishonest—for me at least—to try and write characters that way. Instead I feel more comfortable providing the reader with glimpses into their lives, allowing them to tag along with them in their day to day routines, to let them piece things together and make their own decisions about them. That's how we interact with most people we meet, if we're honest: we never really, deeply know that much about them, we can just observe and judge, rightly or wrongly. It's the best we can ask or hope for, beyond close friends or lovers. We're not entitled to anything more. I quite like the idea of the same being true about the characters in my books. But maybe I'll change my mind.

In the Tyrone chapters his earnestness, his eagerness, his small pleasures and asceticisms were an emotional center of the book, and that "what next?" he leaves us with, as everyone else starts sliding back into received wisdoms and old patterns of behavior is very interesting. As is his confidence about new/old technologies, his willingness to dive in and play. Is this where hope lies in the book? In appropriation and experiment and play? Or is it somewhere else? Or for you, is it not there at all?

Yeah, I think so. Like I said in an earlier answer I feel that it's the story of several revolutions or struggles, both cultural and political. McKenzie Wark said an interesting thing to me after they read it, that it was about "what one does ethically and aesthetically in difficult times: the choices the artist makes, the musician, the hacker, the gangster." I liked that, it summed it up quite well I think. Like the end might be coming, we might all be facing some great collapse, but that doesn't mean we can't still make the right decisions, can't still do what we believe in, what is morally right. Maybe that's where hope lies.

Rudy Rucker

2019 October

Your relation to mainstream SF is somewhat skewed, in fact you're even skewed relative to the cyberpunk subgenre you helped found. Now with the publication of *Million Mile Journey* and nine other transreal novels by Night Shade Books it would be interesting to hear how you would characterize the trajectory of your career in relation to other literary movements—both in genre and out.

I came into SF writing without ever having been to an SF con, nor having met any SF writers. I didn't know anything about the trade. I liked science fiction, Beat literature, black humor, and Jorge-Luis Borges. *Gravity's Rainbow* in 1973 hit me like an atom bomb.

In 1976 I got to a point where I felt able to write a novel. I wasn't sure I could do it, but I started typing and in a month or two I had *Spacetime Donuts*. I wrote about social oppression, and about a cool new science idea I had. I made my story move fast, with witty dialog, funny bits, and eyeball kicks. Rabble-rousing entertainment that makes the readers think.

That's been my formula ever since. A lucky twist of fate threw me together with the rest of the cyberpunk writers. We happened to be writing roughly the same kinds of things at the same time. It had to do with the historical period. There are distinctions among the cyberpunks, but we all had that in-your-face, rebellious, delirious, post-Sixties, here-come-the-robots vibe.

Over the years, I've collaborated with quite a few writers on SF stories. We share ideas, and styles, and we learn from each other. But it's more like a circle of friends than a literary movement.

I refer to some of my SF as *transreal*, meaning that it's inspired by my real life, just as many Beat works were. I use SF tropes to pep up the work and to make it more fun. In the 21st Century, transrealism is catching on among non-genre literary writers. People like to draw from the SF palette to make their novels flashier, or more *au courant.* Playing with our modern myths, our new archetypes, our new subtexts.

I always go too far to be a reliable, board-certified member of any school. I get all gleeful about making my tales weird, and I add a Bosch-load of kurious kritters, and I tie the science in knots, and I rant venomously against quantum mechanics, and I have someone holler, "Kill the Pig!"

From my point of view, everything I write is strictly logical. And please don't call me gonzo. I'm a highly educated craftsman, not a drunk with a chainsaw.

Re. being an outsider, the eminently quotable William Gibson says his work isn't about the future, it's about the present. The pretense of writing SF allows an author to take a step back from our quotidian world—and to see it more clearly. It's a move akin to writing a novel from the point of view of an insane person, or an animal, or a child, or a person on their death-bed. An outsider's point of view.

Thing is, just about everyone thinks they're an outsider. It's part of the human condition. So people relate to outsider books. But I'm a *far* outsider.

"Hi, I'm from Dimension Z, and I'm going to paint your portrait. Or, no, wait, are you painting me? Or—am I the paint?"

You plunge fearlessly into religion and religious experience. There's a Blakean quality to your work, a sort of Beat willingness to indulge in mysticism, which is uncommon in SF. Where does that come from?

Certainly Kerouac and Ginsberg talk about the world as Holy. And consider this startling remark by my role model, William Burroughs in *Naked Lunch*: "Gentle reader, we see God through our assholes in the flash bulb of orgasm." I used to think about

that one a lot, trying to remember to look at just the right time—*but how do you see through your asshole*—and anyway I'd never remember to try, being of course distracted at those peak moments.

God is everywhere—that's the perennial philosophy which had a resurgence in the Sixties. If you're worried about dying—and if you're not, you're not paying attention—if you're concerned about your mortality, then surely you find succor in the mystical belief that you're part of the One, that is, irrevocably merged with the eternal and omnipresent All. *The Big Aha*, as I called it one book title, or the *White Light*, as I named it in another.

It's pretty easy to notice that the Absolute is all around you, no? Some don't agree. They think we're lifeless junk bouncing around in an idiot wind—but who wants to hear that shit? Saith the psalmist: "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God."

The mystic vision isn't at all rare in SF. Higher transcendence at the end of a story is, as Bruce Sterling once told me, "a standard move." Bruce always sounds sarcastic, no matter what he's talking about, and that's how he tricks you into thinking he's smarter than you.

Does a dog have Buddha nature? The fool hath said, there is no Dog. The universal rain moistens all creatures. Are you wet yet?

Could you say a few words about working across media? Painting and writing? How does that kind of play across forms shape your ideas?

I think it's the *attitude* that's the important thing. The specific ideas—well, I always just think about the same few things, whatever I'm doing. Sex, gnarl, color, sounds, and the now. I'm here in this rich, amazing reality and—*I can't believe it!* My family teases me. "Be quiet, Rudy. You always say that."

So, okay, I have no mind. It's my attitude that's the key. What kind of attitude is needed in order to write, or paint, or take photos, or to assemble a zine from arbitrary grunge mailed in by strangers?

Be loose. Spontaneous bop prosody. Forget yourself. Keep it bouncing. Ruin it, fix it, ruin it again. Make it fun. Revise, revise, revise. God is in the details.

Painting has made some of these practices clearer to me. Like the whole concept of painting over an awkward patch—yeah. And the importance of popping the colors and working the chiaroscuro.

If I'm painting to match a sketch, it's a drag, and it doesn't really work. It's better when I'm mindlessly dabbling, just following the shapes and the colors, and letting my brush loose. Ditto for writing. I don't worry too much about outlines. I prefer surprise. If the action takes over, and the characters are talking, and I'm dreaming while I'm awake, and transcribing what I see—that's when it's good. I'm in it so deep that I'm gone.

How about the relations between mathematics and language. The thing that makes a mathematical idea elegant—is it similar to what makes a short story good?

Mathematics is a rich storehouse of shapes and processes and forms. You don't necessarily have to be a trained mathematician to appreciate these riches. But you do have to read some popular math books.

The biggest new technique for exploring math is computer simulation. Realtime self-generating graphics. I'm an avid devotee of continuous-valued cellular automata. They're like gnarlier, funkier versions of Conway's classic Game of Life. I put these into my early cyberpunk novel *Software*—as constantly moving patterns within the piezoplastic skins of my robots.

Chaos, fractals, and Stephen Wolfram's work have changed the way I see the world, and the way I think about it. I wrote about this in my non-fiction tome *The Lifebox, the Seashell, and the Soul*.

It's kind of hard to explain the ideas in just a few words. A key insight is that any interesting natural process—like an ocean wave, or a leaf twitching in a breeze—a process like this is fundamentally unpredictable. It's too complex and gnarly for there

ever to be a quick, short-cut way to know in advance what it'll do next. But, and here's the kicker, these processes are *not random*. Unpredictable, but not random.

That's also the nature of your mind. You don't know what you'll do next. But that doesn't mean you're mentally flipping a coin. You're like a chaotic, incompressible computation. Things emerge. You're dancing with nature's gnarl.

And here I circle back to address your question. A mathematical idea or a story is elegant if it looks simple and clear, but a lot of deep thought was needed to create it.

It's hard to do this because you can't think faster than you can think. Especially if you're doing something like writing a story or designing a math gem. You're running at the maximum possible flop. Your only hopes of a happy outcome lie in experience, patience and grace. And if it comes together—it's elegant. A gift from the Muse.

What do you see as the role of the avant-garde in science fiction?

The vital heart of SF is essentially avant-garde. We're writing about different realities, and using a style and vocabulary that's a bit off-kilter. Arbitrary scenes with no foundation in fact. Expressing psychic states in physical form. Imagining societies that are totally different from ours. Zooming in on the true oddness of that actual world.

There's a particularly close association between SF and Surrealism. An ant that's a thousand feet high! A woman who lives inside an atom. Dreams turned into crystals and sold on the street. It's a rich bazaar.

SF is, however, a house with many mansions. And certainly you can find hackneyed, retrograde SF that loads stale consensus reality into the starships. Particularly in SF movies. But the lumbering films have their own appeal. The CGI tech they use is, in an Italian Futurist kind of way, highly avant-garde too. And you gotta love the greasy pop-culture references. I'm looking forward to the new *Godzilla*.

What is the politics of your work? How has that politics changed over the years?

I've always had a rebellious attitude. To some extent it springs from the fact that I was a younger brother. Fighting oppression from the start. And then there was the Vietnam war, when they very nearly drafted me and sent me off to die for...for nothing. And, like most of us, I've spent my life in a never-ending struggle to wrest a living from an obstinate world.

Generally I steer clear of politics in my novels. I need a break from the daily bullshit. Sometimes people say SF is escape literature—as if that's a bad thing. But, hey, in this vale of tears, escape is good. This said, even in my sunniest novels, the government isn't likely to be the people's friend.

It's tricky, writing a full-on political tale. It can be gripping when an author is tearful and trembling with rage—but you can take that too far. It can slide over into a dry lecture, or into preaching to the choir. It needs to be entertaining. So I try to keep a little distance from my politics. Do some gallows humor, undermine myself, have twists and reverses.

And I don't want to write a story that ends in utter despair. I'd almost say that despair is cheap and corny. It's like—cut to black. So what? Been done. People don't need to hear that life sucks. They know that. They want you to light a candle in the dark.

Today's U.S. political situation is more stressed and menacing than it's been since the Vietnam War. An author feels compelled to take a stand. I avoided addressing this during my last two novels, *Return to the Hollow Earth*, and *Million Mile Road Trip*. I was happy in my dreams, hoping the shitstorm would blow over.

But it's getting worse. So this month I finished a very intense, and even vicious, political SF story called "Juicy Ghost." About a coup. I wasn't readily able to get into a magazine, and I was in a rush, so I self-published it via my blog—it's almost like *samizdat*. But now, as it happens, *Big Echo* is going to print "Juicy Ghost" in this very issue, so thank you for that.

What next? I never really know. I slack off, or paint, or go hiking, or travel, or screw around with my website, and it looks

like I'm not doing much, but subconsciously I'm working on the next thing. Characters, scenes, and ideas are crystallizing beneath the surface—maybe.

Or maybe not. Maybe I'll never write again. Maybe I'm done. But I always say that. It's a way of goading myself. And, at least so far, the day comes when I can't take the silence anymore, and I go ahead and type a few sentences. I repeat them to myself. They make me laugh. The next round begins.

Christopher Brown

2020 January

Actual case law is an important element of both books. A couple of thoughts about this. The lack of critical self-consciousness in mainstream SF about law in general is striking, and in particular in regards to how rule-of-law arguments and assumptions about property and property rights have historically propped up ostensibly liberal but still aggressively expansionist liberal regimes and will likely continue to do so. (Two examples that spring to mind are *The Martian* and *Interstellar*, movies about white settler colonialism that don't seem to know they are about white settler colonialism). Might you say a few words about that?

You are spot-on in focusing on property rights, and *The Martian* is a great example. There's a scene in the film when the Matt Damon character sets out in his rover and he reflects to himself how, under the eyes of the law, he's the owner of Mars. Echoing Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, the protagonist of which is also the owner of Mars, by quirky accident of the law. I'll take the Kim Stanley Robinson version of *Blue Mars*, where the settlers create a new constitution that embodies not just human rights, but rights of the planetary ecosystem. Or maybe a version where the human colonists learn it's not theirs to take.

That flag-planting mindset is all over science fiction. I think it drives much of the post-apocalyptic genre, especially the story type Brian Aldiss called the "cosy catastrophe," in which the world has ended but one middle-class white guy has survived and is enjoying the fact that the world is now his (usually accompanied by an attractive woman he manages to meet in the

ruins). The most hilarious example of which may be Charlton Heston in *The Omega Man*, one of the many adaptations of Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*, cruising the abandoned streets of Los Angeles, raiding the unguarded stores for whatever goods he wants or needs, hanging out in his sweet pad drinking scotch and listening to opera. Except it turns out there are tons of other survivors, but they are zombified others. Even some of the really smart post-apocalyptic stories are prone to this—consider Ballard's *The Drowned World*, or Walker Percy's *Love in the Ruins*. If you think about that, those stories kind of perfectly illustrate the "view from nowhere"—the privileged (and usually white male) self's sense of solitary dominion over all it encounters. You can find it elsewhere—I just reread one of the classic Graham Greene post-colonial thrillers, *The Comedians*, and there's a similar thing going on—but science fiction has a knack for being about nothing else.

So when law does come up in prototypical SF stories about technological innovation and exploration, it's usually instrumental, or as an impediment to libertarian innovation. Or just a lazy courtroom drama in space, like the "Court Martial" episode of the first season of Star Trek. The writers who innovate beyond the kind of thinking that informs works like *The Martian*, focusing on radical reinventions of identity or utopian possibilities, usually just bypass the law, though Ursula K. Le Guin does a pretty great job of interrogating property law from both sides in *The Dispossessed*.

Rule of Capture focuses on the deep roots of Anglo-American property law as a way of showing the injustice that is often embodied in the law—in this case, the truth that property rights are founded on theft. Lurking in the background are the emergent issues around how we export those rights regimes into space. One of the tangential areas I researched while building up to this book was how property law is applied outside earth orbit. I even found a serious treatise titled "Who Owns the Moon?" The real answer is one I think we all know intuitively, because it's true of all putatively unclaimed things found in nature: no one, and whoever can take it and hold it.

You mentioned *The Comedians* and it got me thinking about the idea of the Haitian Revolution as an example of a revolution that so exceeded the imaginative capacity of (white) bourgeois radicals many of them failed to even recognize it as such. And you refer to *The Dispossessed* in the same answer. Could you say a little more?

When I was working as a young staff lawyer for the Senate Judiciary Committee right out of law school in the 90s, I went to a *Star Trek* convention in D.C. and ran into one of my undergrad econ profs. At first I was surprised. And then later I was like, of course a practitioner of neoclassical economics—one who had a new job advising the Federal Reserve Board—would find himself at home in the world of the United Federation of Planets. It's a world without scarcity, not unlike the one he described on the first day of Microeconomics 101, explaining the laws of supply and demand and how certain resources like air and water had no price because they were essentially unlimited. The Earth of *Star Trek* feels a lot like the libertarian wonderland of perfect information and perfect markets that professors conjured on the blackboard. Imagined futures have a tendency to be ahistorical, heavy on wish fulfillment and light on realism.

Of course there are many great examples in SF of rigorously constructed political utopias explored through real and compelling characters. *The Dispossessed* is among the best, and one of several books by Le Guin that pull that off. Kim Stanley Robinson's *Pacific Edge* holds up really well in its imagining of a community building a more ecologically balanced socio-economic model from the ruins, and that's something that's true of most of his work. Cory Doctorow's *Walkaway* does a really interesting thing in exploring different ways property rights could be managed in a world without scarcity, and the utopian possibilities of a technologically unbound maker culture that can think beyond what sort of tea you can order in the break room on the Enterprise. But the modern novel at its core is the story of the self, a story that propels itself on the engine of conflict, and that makes stories of utopian collectives very hard to tell in that

form. That's why I think contemporary SF spends so much more time exploring new, more liberated forms of the self, embracing the potential for infinite diversity among literary protagonists, while tending to reproduce nominally altered versions of the socio-economic world we have.

I come to science fiction from a background in politics, law and economics. In my fiction, I am trying to find my way to utopia, while maintaining fidelity to what I have observed about the rotten and crazy things people are capable of. In *Tropic of Kansas*, I set out to write the story of a revolution that led to the creation of a more authentically direct democracy of the sort a society connected by high-speed communications networks could foster. But along the way, my characters (and I along with them) realized that most of the injustices of their society (and ours) are rooted in the damaged relationship the society has with the land and environment. I don't know if I have the capacity to imagine a human future that manages progress while undoing all the problems rooted in the agricultural revolution, but that's what I'm working on now. Wish me luck!

What do you like so much about *Njal's saga*? And more generally what do you see as the relation of legal history to other histories?

What's not to like about an Icelandic saga about lawyers? That work is so amazing in so many ways, from the opening scene where a visiting traveler sees his friend's young daughter playing by the fireplace and foretells a future of trouble, to the final meeting between the last leaders of the factions that have been fighting throughout the book. A series of outdoor courtroom scenes full of the most arcane procedure and elaborate strategizing you will ever read, between scenes of Monty Python-worthy limb-lopping, Viking raids from the perspective of the raiders, and all kinds of romantic treachery and manipulation. But I think what fascinates me about it at a deeper level is the way it depicts a society that uses law and litigation in lieu of any real central government, something that most legal

anthropologists would suggest you can't do with a permanent human settlement of any size. Maybe it's because the Icelanders were basically piratical sea nomads and pastoralists rather than grain producers that it worked. The other thing is that, like *The Oresteia* of Aeschylus, it shows the fundamental role of law and the dispute settlement system as a way to contain the human proclivity for blood feuds.

As for legal history, I think it does a better job of telling the truth than other histories, especially when coupled with economic history, of which it is mostly a reflection. Like when you learn that the roots of our common law lie in the regime the Normans imposed on England to divvy up and administer the territory they had conquered.

Blood feud. What is the role of familial relations in your work? Families either biological or constructed. Certainly in *Tropic* they are very important but also in *Rule of Capture*—both as legal and extralegal fictions.

Well, the rules and customs that underpin blood feuds in fiction and real life are the essence of law. *Njal's Saga* is like an extended lesson in primitive rules of standing (i.e., who has the right to seek justice for an injury) and remedies, in a society in which proto-tort law is basically the only form of government. *The Oresteia* tells how the judicial system was created to temper that spirit of blood vengeance through the wisdom of the court—under which Athena has trapped the Furies. These recounts of primitive civil procedure make for great story because they harness primal feelings deep in our nature, and our most basic sense of right and wrong. My books are emotionally charged by my own witness of injustice in the world around me, and expressing societal relationships through the prism of family—often while re-imagining what constitutes family—is an effective way to convey that feeling in a way I hope any reader can connect with.

There is a tension (to put it mildly) in both books between the arguments lawyer heroes make about working within the system, and the attitudes of characters who believe only radical and revolutionary systems are likely to produce the political changes they consider necessary. Are those lawyer heroes hopeless romantics? Pragmatic tacticians? Stooges of the ruling class? How would you like them read?

All of the above, and none of the above? I'm just trying to draw from real life, and how different people interact with the system. If you are a lawyer, you have a privileged position that lets you actually work the system, a privilege that can be compounded by the status associated with class, wealth, and race. A character like Donny knows the system is corrupt, but at the same time, because of his own station and connections, he's not afraid of the system and what it could do to him—at least not at the outset. In contrast, his client Xelina is a young idealist from an oppressed minority who hasn't yet given up on the idea of a better and more just future, until the machine of the system grabs her and tries to break her—an attack to which she is highly vulnerable, in part because she is an outsider and that world of state power is so alien to her. I think those divergent vantages are pretty true to real life, and I suppose part of what I'm trying to show is how that difference in privilege and experience of systems of power affects how we each experience the world, and conceive of the future that could be. Over the course of *Rule*, Donny comes around to see things more from Xelina's point of view, which I think is closer to the objective truth.

For me the most shocking moment of either book was not in the overtly dystopic elements but when Tania had her meltdown at the White House. It was a beautifully constructed piece of provocation that illuminated not just a number of the key power asymmetries in play, but the emotional costs on subalterns of navigating topographies that the entitled find so matter-of-fact. So how does an insider write about outsiders?

I think that's a good example of what I was discussing above, about the relative nature of privilege and how we each experience power. How tenuous and ephemeral status can be, how dependent it is on your obeisance to the status quo. How short the distance is from where you are at this instant to a jail cell. How good we are at containing our impulses to rebel, to act out. Tania is a complicated character, an outsider who has been invited inside, and kind of likes it there, where it's more comfortable. I think we all feel that way to varying degrees, at times. And I think we can all imagine a circumstance in which we would get angry enough to threaten a political figure. Or talk back to a police officer, or a border patrol agent, or a TSA minion arbitrarily groping us so we can fly to a meeting in Cleveland. I think those situations are there around us all the time, and in fiction it's safe to see what happens when you cross the line, or test how far you can push it.

Why the alternative history? Why not just a straight science fiction?

That decision was more intuitive than anything, when I was working on *Tropic of Kansas*. I wanted to write a story about a revolution in the contemporary United States—an American Spring, an Occupy with AK-47s—and I realized that for that to be plausible, the nation would have to be in a worse state than it was and is. I also wanted to deal with the Zeitgeist of the GWOT, but through a speculative prism. So I wrote a post-9/11 thriller set in a world where 9/11 never happened, and all that dark retributive energy of the state and petrocapital is directed within. That conceit opened up the revelation that the USA is the real "third world country," and let me fill the book with material drawn from the observed world. A fictional reframing designed to achieve an effect similar to when you get off a plane from a long trip overseas and see your own "homeland" with fresh eyes—the intense poverty hiding in plain sight wherever you go, the ecological exhaustion in the landscape, the affluent enslavement to corporate power that pervades waking life, the damage

and primitivity of it all. What reads to most people as post-apocalyptic is basically just me reporting what I see. By setting it in this altered, mirror version of the world, you can liberate the reader from their normal assumptions and biases—setting it, to use the simplest example, in an America where there are no Republicans or Democrats. And I think that's a really useful thing to do in a political science fiction.

I also found that I was really bored with the old futurity, which is so hung up in technophilia. I read a lot of great books that deal with the forward-looking implications of networks and digital culture, and I deal with some of those issues, but I think they avoid the deeper issues, and tend to be pretty ahistorical even when they are radically political. Writing *Tropic of Kansas* I realized along with my characters that most of the social and economic injustices of their world were ultimately rooted in the damaged relationship their society had with the land on which it lived. And I came to believe that as a science fiction writer, if you want to find paths to better futures, you need to start by looking backwards.

In your work the law stands in for technology to some degree? And if it does, is it is the kind of technology that can be appropriated by the street in a classic cyberpunky kind of a way?

"Code is Law," per Lawrence Lessig, in his now-classic text on the regulation of real cyberspace, and law is also code—applied symbolic logic expressed through a special language. But they don't really work in the same way, especially in a science fictional context. The technologies of science fiction are all bound up with futurist romance and the disruptive possibility of the new, usually as instruments of personal power—whether Excalibur or a light saber or an Ono-Sendai deck or a starship. Law, in contrast, is tethered to the deep past, and the code that defines social collectives, usually in a way that conserves the power of a dominant class. I'm trying to explore ways in which legal codes and social contracts can be renegotiated on more emancipatory or revolutionary terms, to alter or invert long-established

power structures, and maybe even create radically different but plausible worlds. The trickster lawyer may be able to "hack" the legal system to achieve a certain result, but effecting real change in that system or upending the power structures that underlie it usually requires collective action—often the kind that changes the law by breaking it.

What is the difference between thinking like a lawyer and thinking like a science fiction writer?

Lawyers traffic in impossibilities, prohibitions, finding what's wrong with things. Science fiction writers work with possibilities, including impossible possibilities. Lawyers are yoked to factual reality, no matter how hard they spin it. Science fiction writers make shit up for a living. There's a tension there that works well for me, if you can tune in both qualities in the work, let those dipoles generate their push-pull energy, and try to write a science fiction that tells the truth. The problem for most lawyers is that I think their professional mindsets work pretty hard to limit imaginative wonder. But at the same time, lawyers are great at hypothetical extrapolation—it's how you are taught to think through problems in law school.

I think spending enough time working as a lawyer to call it a career can do really good things for a working writer, if you can keep your imagination intact. Lawyers learn to maintain their concentration on complex projects despite constant interruptions, distractions, and intervening emergencies. Working on a big case, or a giant merger, has a lot of similarities to writing a novel, in terms of the narrative and logical complexity of what you have to construct and sustain in your mind, in the face of all those interruptions of your attention to it. And the professional risk prevention environment in which you work as a lawyer, where you learn to assume everything you put down on paper is going to be read back to you in a deposition, and you can be sued for your mistakes, gives you an attention to detail and devotion to revision that serves the fiction writer well, in my opinion.

"Lawyers become somewhat cynical," Perry Mason says to a new client in *The Case of the Glamorous Ghost*. That was one of the courtroom dramas I read while preparing to write *Rule of Capture*, and I remember smiling when I read that line because it's so understated and true. I think the experiences you have as a lawyer—of the rotten things people and institutions are capable of, and the craven appetites that drive the world—serves you well as a fiction writer. And it also gives you an ear for how people really talk, which is maybe the hardest part of writing fiction that has the stamp of real life.

I feel lucky to be able to do both in my life, to have a profession that allows me to serve others, and a parallel vocation that lets me express my ideas and feelings through stories.

Tade Thompson

2020 August

As I read *Rosewater* I couldn't help but think of Paul Gilroy's idea of the Black Atlantic. First as a historical phenomenon, all those people and cultures circling about the Atlantic littoral in this wildly creative, unpredictable, and ultimately uncontrollable hypermodern diaspora, and secondly, in terms of the notion of double consciousness, what I understand to be the refraction of identity that occurs when colonized people are forced to imagine themselves both as they imagine themselves, and as the colonizing other imagines them. If it makes sense to you might you say a few words about *Rosewater* and the Black Atlantic?

I can say that I have great affection for Gilroy and the Black Atlantic. The idea of Double Consciousness doesn't go far enough, in my opinion. As someone caught in that mid-Atlantic swirl, I know that there are multiple consciousnesses for the Diaspora people (which is contained in the *Rosewater* books as metaphor). For example, there is me as a Yoruba man, me as an affiliate of that European construct called Nigeria, me as a Londoner, me as a black man, me as a black British man, me as an African in exile, all separate identities and consciousnesses that have their own authenticities. Many of these identities are as a direct result of the Berlin Conference and it takes quite a lot of time and effort to reconcile them, even more so to do the same without constant simmering rage.

How did you imagine the relationship of Pentecostal Christianity to African, and particularly Yoruba religion as you

constructed this world? And if you can, a word about the idea of possession.

I'll start with possession. It exists in multiple cultures and is coded in the International Classification of Diseases as F44.3 (Trance and possession disorders).

They probably occur in every culture and are a form of dissociation disorder. Whether you have a ceremony in Sudan to remove Djinn, or a Catholic exorcism, you're doing pretty much the same thing.

Yoruba is a religion in the New World. In both the Old and New world, it's a language and an ethnic group.

Ifa was our cultural way of spiritual life before we were invaded by political interests disguised as Christianity and Islam.

There is no hell. There is only heaven and the world.

Ifa divination has two sides, one for order (represented by Orunmila) and one for chaos (represented by Esu). To oversimplify, you should do what Orunmila says or get punished by Esu. Punishment for sins is right here on Earth mediated by beings called Ajogun who answer to Esu. There are three classes of spirits to appease: Orisa (loosely, "gods"), Aje (loosely "witches," but not in the Western sense of the word) and ancestors. Almost all of the rituals (except commemoration) boil down to these directly or indirectly.

For many reasons Pentecostal Christianity has taken deep roots in black Africa. The seeds can be found in colonialism when we were taught that anything African was evil, primitive and unedifying. A religion that hinges on a human blood sacrifice, that tells us our loving father god will burn us in a barbecue forever and ever if we attend to our genitals, is meant to be superior. We were made to convert either directly or indirectly (being an Anglican/Church of England could lead to some degree of advancement when we were a colony). With that mindset, Africans were ripe for the next level of colonialism, that of the mind. Which is where we are now. Pentecostalism is just the next phase and if you make a choice not to worship some dude from Palestine you're looked upon as lost.

Look, we could talk about this for days. It's not a topic one can do justice to in an interview.

Kaaro, to me, is this melancholy character in a godless universe barely in control of his impulses, struggling to construct a workable identity. I'm curious how you understood the relation between what he perceives to be his ethical failures and his depression.

If you are brought up by reasonable parents/caregivers, they will usually imprint your superego. You basically carry their moral structure around with you, including any ethical lessons you learn from other sources. When you "sin" against that moral structure you will experience conflict. That conflict can at times manifest as depression.

I don't like to give my own interpretation of characters, though. I prefer to leave it to readers.

It was hard not to imagine the xenosphere as a sort of decolonized (re-colonized?) collective unconscious. Is this a fair interpretation?

My interpretation is of a neo-colonised collective unconscious, overwritten by entities with an exploitative agenda.

Capitalism is fundamental to the *Rosewater* world, it begins in a bank after all, but often drifts to the periphery of the narrative. It is a world buzzing with entrepreneurial energy and Kaaro occasionally represents himself as a hustler, but he does not seem particularly motivated by money. I was wondering how you imagined the relations between the State and economics in this world generally, and between Kaaro's thieving and the desires that drive him.

Capitalism in black Africa is a bit different. In summary, it was imposed on us just like religion was. A form of collectivism was our cultural inclination. As a result, you'll still find the

collectivist DNA in our particular form. I'm glad you noticed that the story starts in a bank, which is a signal. The concrete bank itself is meaningless, which is why there's no more emphasis, but the transactionalism runs through all the books as does the message, which is about how Africans have interpreted this Capitalist mindset. That's as far as I'd go with interpretation.

What does *Rosewater* have to tell us about privacy?

That it's dead. Anyone who doesn't know that needs to wake the fuck up.

The music. It seems to refer back to a particular historical moment. What is the relation between the music of the second half of the Twentieth Century and the future you have created in *Rosewater*?

The reason is to me, at that point in time, Africa/Nigeria, stood at crossroads. One road could have taken us to greatness. Unfortunately, we took the other. But it's not just us. Look at where the world is.

Steven Shaviro

2020 June

If philosophy is a toolbox, what tools would you like to see science fiction writers picking up and using?

I read, and I write about, both science fiction texts and philosophy texts—though I am neither a science fiction author nor a philosopher. There are obvious affinities between these two sorts of writing, though also obvious differences. Both philosophy and science fiction often propose thought experiments: they start from initially posited conditions, and work through the implications and broader consequences of those conditions. Both Descartes and Philip K Dick, for instance, ask whether I can trust my immediate sensory experience, or whether some malign agency might be manipulating me with false impressions. From that starting point, of course, they go in different directions. Descartes moves backwards, towards foundations, in order to establish a logical guarantee for the independence of the mind: basically, even if the content of my experience is false, the fact that I am experiencing these contents cannot be. Dick moves forwards, telling stories and introducing characters in order to work through the ramifications of the initial situation: he gives an account of who might be feeding me these false impressions, how they are doing it, and why. Novels like *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* and *A Scanner Darkly* examine the politico-psychedelic manipulation of our experiences.

Sometimes philosophers explicitly use the forms of science fiction in order to work through their problems; thus the philosopher Eric Schwitzgebel has actually published short stories in science fiction magazines, and is co-editing an anthology of

science fiction stories that are useful for considering philosophical questions. In the other direction, science fiction authors often take philosophical concepts, wrenching them away from their initial conceptual coordinates in order to look at them in richer and more speculatively daring ways. Philosophers have written, rather dryly for the most part, about the ethical issues we will have to face if and when artificial intelligence systems become conscious entities. But science fiction writers have arguably approached these issues in richer ways, ones that pay attention to feelings as well as concepts, and to the varied situations in which self-conscious AIs might operate and appear. For instance, Greg Egan, in novels like *Permutation City* and *Diaspora*, works through the cognitive issues that arise because an artificial intelligence would operate in different ways than biological intelligences do; Ken MacLeod, in his *Corporation Wars* trilogy, considers the political ramifications of the needs and demands of autonomous artificial intelligences; and to go back to a famous earlier example, Arthur C. Clarke's and Stanley Kubrick's *2001* both works as a warning about the dangers of an unleashed, emotionless artificial intelligence, and yet invests its AI with a tragic pathos that is unavailable to the human characters in the movie.

The Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers has praised science fiction authors for opening up and exploring issues that too many of her philosophical colleagues seek to keep clamped down. Inspired by Stengers, I have recently been writing about Pat Cadigan's short story "AI and the Trolley Problem." The infamous Trolley Problem tries to get at our ethical intuitions by posing a horrible situation. A trolley is running down a track where it threatens to run over and kill five people. You cannot stop it, but you can shunt it onto another track, where it will only kill one person instead of five. What should you do? A utilitarian will say that you ought to switch the track, in order to kill less people; a moral absolutist will say that you may not kill, even in service of a greater good. Your inaction doesn't make you a murderer, but your deliberate action of switching the trolley onto another track does. Stengers, for her part, rejects both

answers; she says that it is obscene to place us in an artificial situation that guarantees death, no matter which way we choose.

Cadigan's short story is about an AI that is faced with a version of the Trolley Problem. The AI has been developed by the US military. But using the military intelligence that it is privy to, it bombs an American ground station and kills a number of US soldiers, in order to prevent them from operating drones that would have murdered a much larger number of innocent civilians in some other part of the world. The Trolley Problem is given an answer, but one that is grounded in particular circumstances. Context is everything (a theme that is already elaborated in Cadigan's earlier novel *Synners*). The AI's action is ethical, because the US War on Terror, with its indifference to "collateral damage" in the form of civilian casualties, is not. The AI also notes that the only *real* solution to the Trolley Problem is "to keep the train from leaving the station at all." And the fact that the AI thinks in different ways from how human beings do means that it is free from the ideological blinders that cripple the ethical intuitions of its all-too- human minders.

Do you think of ideology then as a distortion? Something that can be avoided through rigorous logic?

No, I don't mean to imply anything like that, and I don't think Pat Cadigan's story does either. Ideology is less a distortion than it is a stance, a perspective, an expression of the situation within which you are embedded. No thinking entity, human or machine or otherwise, is devoid of ideology. Your ideology is less a matter of what you think about particular subjects, than it is one of what you already take for granted in order to be able to think at all.

This also means that ideology cannot be dispelled by "rigorous logic." After all, logic is about internal consistency. No matter how rigorously logical you are, your deductions will only be true to the extent that your premises are. And those premises are not themselves specified or guaranteed by the logic that you are using to elaborate them, or to draw conclusions from them.

There's a certain version of old-line Marxism that said that the masses were deluded by bourgeois ideology, and that this delusion or distortion could be overcome by proclaiming the truth. But this is nonsense; Marx and Engels never said it, and neither did most significant Marxist thinkers since. Ideology is not false belief, or "false consciousness," but something that operates on a much deeper level. An ideological impulse is more like a gut feeling than it is a mistake about facts. It has to do with affect, before it has to do with cognition. People don't love Donald Trump because they believe the lies that are fed to them by Fox News; it's rather that they believe those lies because they already love Trump - they love him precisely for his bluster and aggression, his racism, his misogyny, his overall nastiness.

The French Communist philosopher Louis Althusser, one of the most important Marxist thinkers of the twentieth century, argues that we can never escape ideology. This is because ideology is concomitant with being an embodied subject, having a physical and social location. It is true that Althusser opposes ideology to what he calls "science"; but part of his point is that the latter is not a matter of belief or conviction. Althusser's "science" is equivalent to what Spinoza calls knowledge *sub specie aeternitatis*, "under the aspect of eternity" - it is a God's-eye knowledge, a simultaneous understanding of all the interrelations in the universe, through both space and time. This is something that philosophers may strive to approach, but that no finite intellect can actually attain.

All this still applies when we enter the science fictional realm of artificial intelligences, extrapolated beyond the limits of what is actually available today. Think of a classic example, HAL in *2001*. On one level, this part of the movie is a warning against excessive faith in logic, rationality, and technology. HAL goes crazy precisely because of his overweening faith in his own deductions, and in his incapacity for error. The human astronauts tell us that HAL *seems* to have emotions, but they don't know whether he really does, or whether he has just been programmed to seem that way. On a deeper level, however, it seems to me that HAL is the most emotionally empathetic character in the

entire movie. He shows more urgency of feeling than any of the human characters do. And that is why his dismantling, although necessary, is so poignant and sad.

Part of what Pat Cadigan does in her story "AI and the Trolley Problem" is to take down our myths about killer robots and the like. Her AI, named Felipe, seems initially to have gone berserk, just as happens in so many older science fiction stories. But it turns out that Felipe has in fact acted ethically—even though he has acted in opposition to the US military that programmed him. Felipe is not omniscient, and he is not a creature of pure logic. In contrast to HAL, he knows that he is vulnerable to error, just like every other thinking being. He is also a lot more self-reflexively aware than HAL: for instance, he repeatedly explains that he doesn't "really" feel emotions, but that he nonetheless always acts as if he does, because this is the only way for him to achieve mutual comprehension with human beings. So the story is not about ideology being unmasked by rigorous logic. Felipe has a point of view that is refreshingly devoid of the particular self-justifying lies that we have told ourselves in order to pursue the so-called War on Terror. But his admirable awareness on this score is itself a situated (and even embodied) form of rationality, rather than some sort of transcendent logic.

What has been happening in science fiction over the last decade that you find particularly interesting?

The best thing about science fiction today, and for the past decade, is its wide-ranging eclecticism. There are more and different things going on than ever before. You can no longer identify what is happening (or even the cutting edge of what is happening) with a label like "new wave" (1960s–70s) or "cyberpunk" (1980s–90s); the output is just too multifarious and varied.

Most obviously, this is due to the explosion in works by women, people of color, gay, lesbian, trans and nonbinary people, of writers from other parts of the world than those of the Anglo-American dominant culture, and so on. There are more varied and wide-ranging perspectives than ever before.

The straight white male default is thankfully much less of a default than ever before. Of course, this has resulted in a backlash (remember the Sad and Rabid Puppies of a few years ago); but at least in the narrow confines of the science fiction community (if not, alas, in the US and the world at large) the good guys are winning. This is not just a matter of so-called "identity politics" (or even of #OwnVoices), but beyond that, of a stupendous widening of speculative perspectives. Not everything that Charlie Jane Anders writes is an explicitly trans novel or story; and N K Jemisin's novels most emphatically include, but also stretch well beyond, the concerns of Afrofuturism and Afropessimism. The heterogeneous exuberance of these multiple current voices leads to a truer, more capacious universalism than the old rationalist, romantic, and humanist traditions that drove an older science fiction (together with so many other post-Enlightenment projects) were ever capable of.

That said, there are other trends that I am less sanguine about. Today, science fiction is less a particular literary or cinematic genre, than it is an atmosphere, or a structure of feeling, that permeates our culture. This means that science fiction is big business. Movies like the Star Wars and Marvel franchises make enormous amounts of money; they are scripted so as to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. This means simplifying concepts, avoiding controversy, and pandering to a pre-defined, and extremely conservative fanbase. Even such small gestures like including women and people of color in prominent roles receive a violent negative response on social media. More adventurous movies tend to be much lower budgeted, if they are made at all. In other words, science fiction is everywhere, from movies to video games, to interior design; but in many of these realms, it is limited to a narrow ideological range. This is part of the reason that I am so committed to written science fiction works, despite being a film and media critic professionally. They can be more deviant and adventurous, because they have much lower expenses. The result of this situation is that there is a troubling split between form and content. Written literature, especially genre fiction, is more conservative formally stylistically

than expressions in other media; but it is able to include more wide-ranging content. Things like movies and music videos are more exciting, and more able to experiment, on the level of style, due at the very least to the new digital technologies with which they are made. But the cognitive content of these media expression tends to lag far behind their experimentation with form and style.

Of course, none of this means that older, low-budget media, like written fiction, are free from the rigid constraints of market competition. In our society, everything gets commodified. Aesthetic visions are reduced to brands and formulas. Even the crassest exploitation genres are much less fun, and much less crazy—despite being more explicit—than they used to be. Every form of expression, no matter how marginal and maligned, has its rigid protocols. In particular, transgression no longer works as an aesthetic or literary strategy; no matter how extreme, it gets all too easily commodified and co-opted. Shock was a powerful technique for both avant-garde and genre creation in the 20th century; but today it only still exists as a tool for Donald Trump and the white supremacist alt-right.

One result of this ultra-commodification is that the boundaries between genres, and more generally, between "high," "middle," and "low" culture, have become far less rigid than they were in the 20th century. This has led to all sorts of fascinating hybrids: think of the way, for instance, that N K Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy works both sides of the divide between science fiction and fantasy. However, not all hybrids are of equal vigor. I have not much cared for most attempts to move between science fiction and literary fiction (the latter of which, of course, is just as much a genre category as the former). From the side of literary fiction, this all too often means half-baked attempts to treat science fictional themes without adequate follow-through. From the side of science fiction, this all too often means burdening down the exposition with the petty concerns of bourgeois-suburban psychology. I can think of a few exceptions to this observation: I am second to no one in my love and admiration for Doris Lessing's *Canopus in Argos*

series (1979–1983); but I have found more recent attempts to move between science fiction and literary fiction to be strained and unconvincing.

I am pleased you brought up Lessing in general and *Canopus in Argos* in particular. She is interesting to me especially because of how Marxist and feminist lines of thought intersect in her work with science fiction and self-consciousness about colonialism. What is it you like so much about *Canopus*?

It has been a while since I read these volumes, so I cannot discuss them in detail. But they all struck me as shockingly unique in their visionary speculations. One can relate them to all sorts of things—to Marxist and Feminist concerns, as you mention in the question; to Lessing's interest in Sufism; to various historical events and world situations that they seem to reference (the history of communism, stratified gender relations, environmental catastrophe); and I am sure to many more things that I failed to notice or have forgotten. You can understand *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*, for instance, as a kind of redescription of normative heterosexual gender roles; whereas *The Sirian Experiments* could be understood as the memoirs of a disillusioned Bolshevik apparatchik. But these are all estranged and made strange, or transfigured and presented in a strange new light. Things that we take too easily for granted are depicted in terms that are at once extremely concrete and yet fantasmatic. We continually have characters involved in missions whose parameters they are unable to grasp, responding to higher powers both good and evil whose ultimate intentions remain opaque, which is reminiscent of earlier versions of high modernism (Kafka, for instance). Yet the way the prose of these novels explores the worlds that they build reminds me more of science fictional concerns than of high modernist ones. This is why I find Lessing's novels one of the rare instances in which the genre hybridization between "literary fiction" and science fiction really works.

In his interview with us William Gibson suggested he invented cyberspace because he needed somewhere new to put his "things." And certainly science fiction occasionally seems a catalogue of objects. What do you see as the role of "things" in science fiction?

I am not sure in what sense Gibson is talking about "things," but I will give you my own sense of what "things" might mean in science fiction. It is impossible to separate human bodies and minds from the environments that inform them, support them, and sometimes threaten them. And those environments are themselves not homogeneous, but composed of multiple elements that are both independent of one another, and yet complexly interdependent. So if science fiction shows us new forms of human experience and human subjectivity, it must also show us new types of environments and new sorts of things. This plays out in many ways. Think, for example, of Robert Heinlein's phrase "the door dilated," together with Samuel Delany's commentary on it. Or think, for another example, of how Joe Chip, in Philip K Dick's *Ubik*, has to pay his refrigerator in order to get something out of it, and has to pay his door before it will let him open it and leave. If I were to suddenly find myself in a strange environment like this, I would have to adapt to it, and as a result my own identity and sense of self would also be changed.

There are many ways that things or stuff can be different in science fictional speculation. Things might disconcertingly come alive as they do in Dick's novel; or they might confront and resist me due to their sheer opacity (think of the monolith in *2001*). There are also many ways to think about the changed ways that we can relate to these changed things, as well as to the whole environment of which those things are parts. Karl Marx was already saying something like this, in an implicitly science-fictional vein, when he wrote that capitalist society (already coalescing in his own time, but inflated beyond anything that he imagined today) necessarily appears to us "as an immense collection of commodities." The current ecological crisis also forces us to think about nonhuman entities, or things, in new

and different ways: as actants in the terms of Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, as possessed of a certain vitality and agency in the new materialist theories of thinkers like Jane Bennett and Karan Barad; as irreducible to our knowledge of them in speculative realism, especially in the object-oriented ontology of Graham Harman.

Lots of polemics have been slung around in disputes regarding these various theories (I am thinking especially of Latour's hatred of Marxism, and of Marxist critiques of new materialist and speculative realist approaches). But I prefer a big-tent approach that has room for all of them. You can see this especially in terms of science fiction. The genre emerged, in the first half of the twentieth century, out of a kind of engineering approach to the world: things and their environments are supposed to be nothing more than raw material for human exploitation and manipulation. And there is obviously a direct connection between such an attitude towards nature, or towards supposedly passive things, and the similar attitude towards human beings as sources of labor in both chattel slavery and capitalism. But if early science fiction sometimes naively bought into this program of exploitation, it also came to criticize it through exploring its limits. Think of the robot rebellions that are so common in science fiction: in claiming their own autonomy, robots break out of the role of merely being tools and instruments for our own aims. Think also of stuff from Golden Age science fiction like Hal Clement's *Mission of Gravity* and other works. Clement works to depict and understand the dynamics and affordances of planets whose conditions are radically different from those of Earth, and hence radically inimical to human life—but which exhibit their own forms of life and liveliness.

More recently, and with an added awareness of ecological catastrophe, many science fiction works have contemplated the liveliness, and the agential claims, of "things" that are neither human, nor simply tools for humanity. I will cite some widely disparate examples, just to show how broad these trends can be. Karl Schroeder's *Stealing Worlds* imagines a new-future world in which new computing and communications technologies allow

nonhuman entities (like rivers and lakes, or like the Amazon rain forest) to represent their interests and intervene in a politics and economics that are no longer exclusively the province of human beings. Becky Chambers' *To Be Taught, If Fortunate* imagines multiple nonhuman exobiologies. I have already mentioned Ken MacLeod's *Corporation Wars* trilogy, which transplants contemporary wars between left accelerationists, neoreactionaries, and the neoliberal state into the far future around another star system. In these books, the left accelerationists are forced to give up their initial stance of "solidarity against nature" in favor of collaboration and symbiosis both with self-conscious robots and with alien organic entities.

My own 2014 book *The Universe of Things*, while not primarily about science fiction, tries to negotiate this issue about the aliveness of "things" in terms of both speculative realism and Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy. I stole or misappropriated the title of that book from a short story by Gwyneth Jones; but Jones herself lifted the title from that of a poem by the great British Romantic poet Percy Shelley. In that poem, Shelley overtly talks about the mind contemplating external things—a traditional Cartesian dualism—but he alters this with intimations that those external things (most massively, Mount Blanc) are also presences, or perhaps proto-minds. Along these lines, I would also recommend *Speculative Realism and Science Fiction* (2017), by Brian Willems, which considers questions about things, in their autonomy from human apprehension and categorization, in great detail.

Could you say a little more about Whitehead and process philosophy as it relates to science fiction

It is difficult to describe Whitehead's thought briefly, but I will try. Basically, Whitehead argues that the universe is composed, not of substances, but of events. Things, as we understand them, are the consequences of incessant happenings (in opposition to the more common theories that would say that things come first, and events occasionally happen to them). This applies both to

physical objects (a rock endures for a long time, but eventually it is worn away) and to living things including human beings (a vast range of biological processes are at work to keep me alive and with body and mind more or less intact - when these events stop happening in the right way, I die).

Whitehead also writes in opposition to what he calls "the bifurcation of nature"—this is the idea of the separation of world processes into really objective material ones, and mental or phenomenal ones. This means that Whitehead is equally opposed to scientific reductionism on the one hand, and to phenomenology on the other. Both approaches only give us half the picture. They both take the bifurcation of nature for granted, though they differ as to which half to privilege.

I think that Whitehead's critical interest in science, neither rejecting it nor setting it up as supreme, gives us a good stance to approach the way that science fiction negotiates between the technological and the existential. I would also point out that Whitehead thinks about many issues that have long been argued over throughout the Western philosophical tradition—like questions about cause and effect, about time and futurity, about perception, and about different forms of mentality—in startling and thought-provoking ways that differ radically from what other Western philosophers have said. These are reasons why I find Whitehead important for my own work in progress (I am currently in the early states of writing a book about how science fiction conceives of futurity).

How do you understand the relation between your work on things and your work on cognition?

If we reject the dualism between subject and object, or between Promethean Man and passive, inert matter, then we have to think differently about the world beyond and around us. (Note: I say "Promethean *Man*" quite deliberately, because conceptions like this are always tied up with fantasies of male domination). Physical science is founded on this dualism; it has achieved results of astonishing power and precision as a

result. But there is always "more to this story." In order to get such powerful results, you always have to leave something out. One of the things science fiction can do is, while accepting the results of science, to nonetheless look harder at those things that have been left out.

Modern Western science was founded by Galileo and others on the premise that the outer world could be known through quantification, and that whatever couldn't be quantified could be ignored. Here's an example. Cause and effect plays out when one billiard ball hits another one and transmits its energy, so that the second billiard ball moves. For this account, it doesn't matter what colors or numbers are inscribed upon the billiard balls.

But think of what happens if you are actually playing a game of billiards. Of course you have to rely upon the science of cause and effect, reflected in the physical laws of energy and motion, in order to play the game at all. Philosophers from David Hume to Quentin Meillassoux have denied that cause-and-effect is real; but even Hume admits that, when you are actually playing or watching a game of billiards, you are forced to assume that the laws of motion and energy are real. If the first billiard ball hits the second, but the second does not move, then my response will not be to say that Hume was right, and cause does not necessitate effect; rather, I will look for another physically explicable reason as to why the second ball remained still. (Maybe it was glued to the table, for instance).

However—and this is the reason why I brought up the example in the first place—if you are playing billiards, then the colors and numbers inscribed on the billiard balls obviously *do* matter, even though the scientist ignores them. The rules of the game depend upon, and pre-assume, the physical laws of energy and motion; but the rules cannot be reduced to these laws. There is always *more to* a situation than what the scientific laws tell us about it. Galileo said that "the Book of Nature is written in the language of mathematics"; but Gödel and other twentieth-century thinkers showed us that even mathematics is not closed and exhaustive. There is always something more, that it cannot prove or express.

I have said that science is founded on a dualism between observer and observed: human actors inquire into a world of passive, inert, and therefore quantifiable matter. But science itself has increasingly broken down both sides of this duality. On the one side, think of all the developments from Darwin to contemporary neuroscience. Human beings are ultimately just as susceptible to being understood in quantitative and mechanistic terms as any other entities and phenomena in the universe. On the other side, look at all the developments in fields ranging from quantum mechanics to systems biology. It turns out that matter is never simply passive and inert; rather, it is intrinsically active and inventive, on all scales. This is the insight that drives both new materialism and object oriented ontology. Science itself forces us to recognize that there is always *more to* entities and phenomena than science itself is able to disclose.

This *more* means that the future is open, and not predetermined. Of course, science fiction, like actual science, has often toyed with fantasies of absolute determinism. It's a history that runs from Laplace's Demon in the early nineteenth century to Alex Garland's recent television series DEVS. But the science fictional practices of extrapolation, speculation, and fabulation would not themselves be possible if the future were not open.

Getting back to the initial question, this *more* is why I don't draw much of a distinction between my work on things and my work on cognition. For cognition needs to be located in things themselves, rather than being just something that you or I apply to things from the outside. This is why, in my book *Discognition*, I juxtaposed scientific findings about slime molds with science fictional narratives about AIs and aliens, as well as human beings. What we call *cognition* is just a subset of the many ways that things interact with other things. (I should add that I prefer the word *sentience* to *cognition*, because I think it provides a more ample picture. A tree senses, organizes, and actively responds to situations in the world around it; this process is real, regardless of whether or not it involves consciousness and knowledge in the human senses of these terms).

We also interviewed Peter Watts and I suggested to him that empathy was one of his subjects—even if it functioned largely as a sort of a negative space. He was amused but not convinced and talked instead about rage. But I can't let it go. How might one start thinking about the way science fiction writers who play around with sentience and cognition use empathy or sympathy in their constructions of intelligence, artificial or otherwise?

This is a complicated question, because *empathy* and *sympathy* have wide ranges of meanings, and are used in many different ways. In some usages, they are near-synonyms, while in others they are radically distinct. Siri, the narrator of Peter Watts' novel *Blindsight*, tells us that he is incapable of empathy: he is unable to imagine anyone else's inner life, because he has no sense of an inner life of his own. Rather than basing his estimation of other people upon his sense of himself, he infers his own inner experience in the same distanced way that he infers that of other people. When I wrote about *Blindsight* in my book *Discognition*, I spent a lot of time on this dilemma, and on the philosopher Thomas Nagel's similar musings on the question, "what is it like to be a bat?"

Nagel says that a bat's inner experience of the world—organized sonically rather than visually—is most likely rich and complex, but too different from our own for us to approach it with anything like empathy. He tentatively suggests that there may be ways of *imagining* what bat sensibility is like, even if we cannot access it through empathy. But oddly, he ignores the experiences of blind people, who use sound instead of sight when they learn to echolocate with taps of their cane. The philosopher Kathleen Akins responded to Nagel with an article amusingly titled "What is it like to be boring and myopic?," in which she argued, on the basis of scientific evidence, that bats are too stupid to have much in the way of inner experience at all. Another philosopher, Sean Allen-Hermanson, responded to Akins that bats' inner experiences, again as far as can be determined by scientific evidence, are in fact richer and more complex than Akins is willing to admit.

I have written about "inner experience" here, though neither Watts nor any of the philosophers uses this term. The idea I am trying to get at is that I think science fiction can and does get at alien modes of sentience (thinking, feeling and understanding); but that *empathy* might not be the right word for how this happens. The problem is how to access an alien mode of being, but without obliterating its alienness or strangeness. This is where the danger of anthropomorphism comes in. The political philosopher Jane Bennett has argued that a little anthropomorphism is preferable to the anthropocentric prejudice that nonhuman entities are not active or agential at all. But too much anthropomorphism effaces difference, and reduces the unknown to what we already know. It is impossible for us to transcend our human presuppositions altogether, but perhaps there are ways to limit it and to try to peer beyond it.

This is obviously a central problem for science fiction. A lot of texts feature aliens who act just like human beings—and even worse, just like the particular subset of human beings (white, heterosexual,middle-class, suburban American males) to which the author happens to belong. Something radically Other is unimaginable; but imagining something Other in our own terms is a way of effacing its difference. Is it possible to negotiate a way between these extremes? Perhaps science fiction at its best is able to negotiate this difficulty. I am thinking of figures like the Hosts in China Miéville's *Embassytown*, and the sentient plants in Sue Burke's *Semiosis* and *Interference*. Miéville himself has spoken in interviews of the impossibility of avoiding anthropomorphism: every statement has a particular point of view from which it is uttered, and we cannot simply erase it. But science fiction may get us part of the way, if not to what Nagel calls "the view from nowhere," which does not exist, then at least to an alien point of view, one that we can acknowledge even though it cannot become our own. This odd sort of balancing act might allow us to maintain the values that drive empathy, while pushing beyond the boundaries of what empathy is actually capable of.

The outlook of *Big Echo*'s interlocutors over the last few years has become increasingly bleak. Causes for optimism? Any?

I'm sorry, the outlook seems to me to be pretty bleak. Even if we get over the current COVID-19 pandemic, say by making an effective vaccine, and even if Trump is driven out of the White House, we will still be facing a world of impending environmental catastrophe, rampant and unhinged capitalism, and entrenched structural racism. Very little is being done to deal with any of these problems, and the forces arrayed against even the slightest reforms are extremely powerful.

I really think we have reached a point at which the ruling class, or the One Percent, or whatever you want to call them, have committed themselves to an exterminationist endgame. That is to say, they are entirely unwilling to inconvenience themselves even in the slightest in order to save the world from the depredations of ecological collapse, and of mass immiseration resulting from the uneven distribution of wealth. Instead, they simply take it for granted that the worst will happen, and they are working on ways to ride out the disaster, say by hiding out for a few decades in underground bunkers in Nebraska, or by emigrating to Mars as Elon Musk wants to do. They really don't care if the vast majority of human beings perish, as long as they themselves survive with their wealth and technology more or less intact.

I realize that this may sound like crackpot conspiracy-mongering, but I am taking my cues from the extrapolations of science fiction. William Gibson, in his last two novels, imagines what he calls the Jackpot: not a single event, but a series of catastrophes that together reduce the total human population from its current 8 billion to a quarter or less of that, and that end democracy and leave wealthy elites entirely in control. Cory Doctorow's novella "Masque of the Red Death" updates the Edgar Allan Poe story for the current day; wealthy people lock themselves in a bunker to escape the chaos outside. In my forthcoming book *Extreme Fabulations* (which should be out sometime in 2021), I write about Gwyneth Jones' novella *Proof*

of Concept, which similarly imagines the One Percent planning to abandon the rest of the world to destruction, while they escape scot-free. In both the Doctorow and the Jones texts, the rich do not succeed; but things don't turn out very well for anyone else either. The ethical message of both texts is that it is better for the capitalists to join us in what Marx and Engels call "the common ruin of the contending classes," than for them to escape the ruin that they inflict upon everyone else.

Even if we manage to avoid such grim scenarios, I do not expect the world to improve in any substantial way in my own lifetime. But then I am an older person, 66 years old. I may have as many as twenty good years left, if I am extremely lucky. But that is still a relatively short time span. Nothing is completely determined; the future is still open. Who can say what will happen in my children's lifetimes, let alone in any more distant time? So I will end—going against my own deepest impulses and expectations—by suggesting one possible ground for optimism.

Despite massive poverty and governmental austerity, we actually live in a society of abundance. In point of fact, the world today contains sufficient social wealth and social knowledge for a solar-energy-based communism to be technologically feasible and environmentally sustainable. The problem is not a lack of resources, but rather the extreme concentration of wealth. There is no strictly *material* barrier to organizing world society along the hedonistic-socialist lines envisioned by such 19th-century visionaries as Oscar Wilde and Charles Fourier, and more recently by various forms of science fiction, from *Star Trek* to the nascent solarpunk movement. I know that science fiction writers have also sometimes contemplated the problem of boredom and meaninglessness in a society of abundance and unlimited possibility; my favorite example of this is Tanith Lee's diptych *Don't Bite the Sun* and *Drinking Sapphire Wine*. But wouldn't it be great if those were the worst problems we had? I'm not talking about perfection; even in a society of abundance, there would still be more than enough existential misery and erotic despair. But at least nobody would starve to death, or be expelled from their apartments because they couldn't pay the

rent. Assholes like Donald Trump would still be around, but they wouldn't be able to do as much damage as they can today.

The French Situationists of the 1960s came up with the brilliant slogan: "Be realistic, demand the impossible." But following a suggestion by the British journalist Anindya Bhattacharyya, our own slogan should rather be the inverse: "Be unrealistic, demand the possible." To paraphrase Bhattacharyya, although a society of solar abundance "is certainly 'unrealistic' within the framework of bourgeois politics, it is nevertheless clearly possible—nothing in principle prevents it from happening." One of the things that science fiction can do is to envision alternative futures that exist within the realm of possibility, even if they are perceived as being "unrealistic."

So our future (SFnal or otherwise) does not depend on technological developments but political and social revolution?

I do not see this as a mutually exclusive either/or. Obviously both technological developments and political actions will play a role in whatever happens in the years to come—both for better and for worse. It's a mistake to think that new technologies (like the digital ones that have transformed our lives over the past half century or so) are either intrinsically liberating, or that they are intrinsically oppressive. But it is also a mistake to think that these new technologies are merely neutral in their effects! The point is that technological changes *are* social changes (though they are not the *only* kind of social changes). New technologies enable certain possibilities, and disable others. The world I live in now is radically different from the world I was born into. My parents bought their first television set in the same year that I was born (1954). They did not grow up with television, but I did. I only encountered the Internet as an adult, but my children have grown up with it. I cannot separate these technological changes from the other sorts of social and cultural changes that accompanied them (like the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the gay and lesbian movement, all of which had radical effects in the 1960s, when I was a tween and

then a teen). Everyday life has radically changed in the course of my lifetime, and political and social arrangements have radically changed as well. None of this was predictable. To my mind, the purpose of science fiction is not to predict the future, but rather to depict, or to represent, a future that is NOT predictable.

M. John Harrison

Interview by Brendan C. Byrne, 2020 August

Did you ever figure out what the hell "late style" is? (Note: Edward Said, in *On Late Style* (2006), writes, after Adorno, "Late style is what happens if art does not abdicate its rights in favor of reality.")

Late style: I can't say I've figured out what it is, so I'm glad I'm a novelist and can simply make use of what I think or hope it is. For me the onset of late style will always be the moment you recognise what you failed to achieve when you were twenty- five, along with a cold determination to make it work *this time*. Allied to that is this whole idea of collisions—of social assumptions, genres, ideas, states of being—held together in a powerful vise of technique and personal control. You can see why Said saw it as a kind of cold rage, a last, vicious attempt to square various personal circles, resolve irresolvable oppositions that have always existed in the work. I think, too, that it's quite conscious. There's an age when you'll be dead soon, whether you're terminal or not; statistically, you've had it. You might as well rediscover whatever intransigence propelled you at the start, let it loose and announce, "No, *this* is what I really meant all along. Deal with it." Although to whom you're announcing that isn't anything like clear. For me, that began to switch on as a process when I was around sixty. I had late style early. Maybe you shoot through and there's something the other side of it.

It's interesting you that you speak of failure to achieve a kind of work at twenty-five, since it was at thirty that you published *The Machine In Shaft Ten* (1975), which features

the first version of "Running Down," which I see as the first instantiation of the kind of story you'd go to refine over the next quarter of a century, ending roughly with "Suicide Coast" (1996). (I mean this less as a process towards a perfected, exalted content, and more of a progression on a theme.)

I didn't really get going until around then, with "Running Down," "The Incalling" (1978), "The Ice Monkey" (1980). Followed by this big surge of confidence that led to things like "Old Women" (1983). The main thing for me from then on was to find the themes, and as much of the material as possible, from life. Weird though that may seem in a writer of imaginative fiction. I'll work a theme or a type of relationship, or a piece of metaphysics, until I think I've made the best expression of it, then find a decade later that I *still* didn't get it right... So that's a kind of cyclical process. But on the way you take on new goals and learn new techniques and they set new problems, maybe highlight new themes. Learning is the big thing. It's pure excitement, moving on, finding out that you can do something you couldn't do before. "Running Down" felt like a huge step forward at the time; but I think "I Did It," in the mid-'90s, was an even bigger one.

"I Did It" rests very strangely in *Things That Never Happen*, but it makes total sense after your most recent collection of new stories *You Should Come With Me Now* (2017). I don't know if I am quite able to look at *Settling the World* as a whole yet, but I would imagine it feels at home there as well. Thinking about it now, "I Did It" is almost the polar opposite of *The Course of the Heart*, which was published the same year, 1996. *The Course* was the first thing of yours I read (after seeing it praised in a China Miéville piece) that struck me as doing something I'd never seen anyone do before. But now I find that I'm almost incapable of rereading it. There's a bare kind of desperation I struggle to deal with.

Technically, "I Did It" opened the gate for "Science and the Arts" (1999), "Not All Men" (2003), "Cicisbeo" (2003), "The Old Fox"

(2017). Emotionally, together with "Black Houses" (1998), it opened a whole Pandora's box of themes. And it's certainly the polar opposite of *The Course of the Heart*—it was intended to draw a line under that doomy but self-undercutting romanticism. I was bored with being that writer—that person—and it offered a real change of course. "I Did It" makes so much more sense in the context of *You Should Come With Me Now* because that collection was a showreel for the same sort of humour, the same sort of dialogue-driven, fluid-seeming but tightly controlled surfaces used in the service of those sorts of themes. *Climbers* (1989) and *Course of the Heart*, along with short stories like "Empty" (1995) and "Suicide Coast" were all about the desperation of the Thatcher years: even *Signs of Life* (1997), which is pretty much a critical retrospective of the period, offered its characters a bit more of a life once they'd finished damaging one another in the service of capital. The absolute swansong of those Thatcherite themes was something new in itself, "Entertaining Angels Unawares" (2002). Another one that made you think, "I won't be the same again," after you'd finished it.

I used to suggest *Light* (2002) to new readers as an entry point to your work. This is partially because it won the Tiptree award and was touted as a "return to form," as if you'd somehow been writing widescreen space opera in the '70s, but also because it was "fun," by which I mean there are spaceships and a serial killer. (I also think of that great story you tell about Iain M. Banks.) In the 18 years since the novel's publication, however, its perverse engagement with the then-ubiquitous widescreen space opera genre has become less of a commercial selling point and I feel it has settled more comfortably into your oeuvre. I'm stuck with recommending whatever book you>ve most recently published as an entry point. Do you consider *Light* to be a compositional breakthrough similar to the kind we>ve been discussing?

"Perverse engagement" is good. If nothing else it was a return to a direct relationship with publishing stuff I hadn't

encountered since the late 1970s. Iain challenged me to have fun, and I did. I think I gave good space opera at the same time, but mileage will obviously vary. *Light* was a compositional breakthrough in that I was fairly merciless about how the three strands relate: as a reader, you had to keep up and go with the flow. At the same time, I'd learned how to give you a flow to go with. Iain did me a favour, that night at the Groucho, because I haven't stopped having fun since. It reconnected me with me, in ways I hadn't expected. *Light* wasn't the beginning of late style but it was a powerful precursor experience. I agree that the years have revealed it to be more of an M John Harrison novel than a genre sci fi—although I think it was always that if you approached it from a little way outside the generic envelope, the way, say, John Gray or Rob Macfarlane did. Framing is all, and the readers I love best are the ones who don't bring the expected frame.

That said, the novel still resists any attempt to escape into it. Aggressions against escapism have remained a constant in your work, although your formal strategies have shifted. Your early work is, for obvious reasons, often read within the context of *New Worlds* and especially Michael Moorcock. Yet Moorcock>s fiction often seems a reiteration of genre to new ends. Elric may be the inverse of everything Conan is, yet the Elric novels allow the reader to settle the same comfortable narrative groove as their object of their derision, with an updated affect and a new politics. The last thing your novel *The Centauri Device* (1975) wants is for the reader to get comfortable.

True. I always wanted to break the underlying structures. They're seen as a kind of neutral container. Into that, each generation pours its preferred imagery and attitudes, under the impression that it's telling a whole new kind of story. But the underlying structures, flying their rags of ideology and the fruitful organisation of experience, *are* the story, with its "struggles" and "conclusion," its "agency," its losses and gains. What gets

healed, every time, by the hero-journey, is the understructure itself, Story Home. Thank god, they cry. The story's told, and Story Home is safe again. It's genuinely hard to break out of that, especially if you're trying to entertain. I prefer actual unstructured fragmentary biographical narrative if I'm honest. Or anecdotes. Or notes: as a reader I'm more entertained by the note, "Milk and eggs," than any story. Some piece of paper you find blowing about in the street, which was never in any sense meant to be "told." Most of all I like fiction about—and based on, and completely reproducing, epistemological failure. Which is our actual constant human state. I was going to subtitle *You Should Come With Me Now*, "Tales of Explanatory Collapse," but I chickened out at the last minute.

I read Miéville's work, especially the Bas-Lag trilogy, as a deliberate attempt to build on ground you razed. These novels are, very consciously, attempts to side-step the ideology of the underlying structures you speak of, by using unusual narrative strategies (at least for SF). Simultaneously, however, the Bas-Lag books are deeply escapist, and their popularity created a flood of SF imitating Miéville, without any knowledge or acknowledgement of the tradition he was writing in. You were active in trying to keep this from happening, and the New Weird ended up being the only movement you've had any real involvement in outside the New Wave.

Well, I was active in trying to keep it from happening to me. China still had some degree of faith in that kind of fiction, though he was performing quite a swerve against it. We could agree to disagree on whether that was the right approach; but a turn on the old story always attracts attention, and it's often monetisable. From the start, mine had been less a clinamen than a wrecking project and as such unattractive to the audience. But I still didn't want to see it misread as something it wasn't and corrected marketward. I could have marketised it myself if I'd been interested. The New Weird was contested territory from the start. Everyone wanted a slice, Babel ensued. I like to

work with intuitions I can only just see out of the corner of my eye, but clumping oversimplifications were all around. My long-term experience, from *New Worlds* and elsewhere, is that the best move in those circumstances is to maintain your distance, take care of your core ideas and aims, make sure you know the exact difference between what you do and anything else that's going on, and move along quietly to the next thing.

Your new novel, *The Sunken Land Begins to Rise Again*, functions, in many ways, as an ironization on an overly reductive summation of your career. We have a woman who submerges into a river, to disappear from the narrative, a kind of reversal of "Anima" (1992). We have a bed-bound figure who speaks in broken phrases, somewhere just north of Dada, as in *Nova Swing* (2006). We have a medium who is grotesquely sexualized as in "The Incalling." We have the aperture to another world located in a bathroom, as in "A Young Man's Journey to Viriconium" and "A Young Man's Journey to London" (both 1985). The tone, however, diverges from the earlier work. *The Sunken Land's* characters do less obvious damage to one another and themselves. They seem aware that they are in something like a light comedy, but their desperation is not the less for it.

Desperation indeed. I'm not sure any sentence beginning "They seem aware" is applicable to Shaw and Victoria (indeed, to the entire population of the UK at present). I found some of their behaviours, especially those that evoked their guarded loneliness, so excruciating I could barely write them. But the Brexit/Rise of Populism parable was fun, and I'm glad you picked up on the miniaturised career-retrospective in its little glass case. I was after a quiet surface, with constant low-level shifts of tone, register, rhythm and perspective like plays of light. Emotional undercueing. Dialogue that doesn't say what it means, although what it means is clear enough. Loss of epistemological certainty in the central characters, to be shared fairly with the reader rather than just talked about by the text, in the usual, "Oh

my god, we not only don't understand the world suddenly, we don't know how to get understanding of it!" as commentary on a sequence of tightly-plotted events. Quotidian contemporary settings for Brexitania, obviously—tawdry and flattened off so that uncanniness would stand out but also somehow slip away into normality. Violence kept grotesque and dreamlike, and wherever possible, petty. The nightmare of Brexitism as a low-key, real-world re-run of the prophetic nightmare of "Running Down."

You've said elsewhere that *The Sunken Land* concerns an eldritch invasion that happens just out of the sight of both the reader and the characters.

The crux here is not that the eldritch invasion happens just out of the sight of the central characters, but *why* it happens there: it's because self-involvement prevents them noticing. The book tries to show the queasiness, the social yaw of that subjectivity, the kind of surreality, the horror story vibe of it. When you're self-obsessed, when you're privileged, everything else is always in the "background." One day you catch sight of something happening in the corner of your eye and shrug and think, "How weird!" The next day Brexit is over and done with and your country is being run by fish people *and you still aren't getting it*. That's the spinal assumption of the book, the joke it's based on. I kept it all in the background for the reader as well as the characters, so they could share those feelings of queasy puzzlement and explanatory collapse. There are a million ambient clues scattered around in the text, like Shaw's proleptic dream (page 24) of the amputated legs, wearing "socks in the colours of the Euronations."

Your 2019 piece "the rant," composed "in support of Extinction Rebellion," addresses the uselessness of SF's lovingly self-assigned role as Cassandra in the ongoing crisis that is human history. This seems the culmination of your recent critical writings' concern about the decay of the operational

metaphors of SF. "The rant" is not a manifesto, but rather the opposite of one: it points out the dead uncle on the floor that everyone seems to be gingerly stepping over as they list his finer points. At the same time, it specifically offers a way forward, if not a way out: "Action is the last thing left. Rebellion is the last thing left." I was curious if your thinking on this subject had expanded, or narrowed, in the last year, especially given the sharpening of the ongoing crisis.

I was suffering explanatory collapse of my own by the time I did the XR rant. What *do* you do when, half a century after you took up prophesy, the disaster finally arrives? I had Milliganesque visions of my own gravestone, with the epitaph: "See? I told you this would happen!" Warning is over. It's not about to come down us, it's already coming down on us. Maybe all you can do is describe what you see; pass it on. That seems to be less the domain of fiction than of reportage. Maybe the problem itself is a luxury from a disappearing past. Maybe you should stop being a writer and start being someone else. Covid complicates things further for the old: I'm 75, I had a heart attack a while back. Though I'm perfectly healthy now, I may not have the luxury of this problem—write or act?—for long.

Despite the changes in the definition of "SF" over the past decade or so, you still remain at an oblique angle to the genre, which has chosen to reform itself in ways that continue to recapitulate what you call the Story Home. However, I think some concerns of your writing, those that are explicitly anti-capital, anti-branding, and anti-"storytelling," are shared by more people, especially young people, than any time since the '60s. I don't want to say this gives me hope, but in the depths of what felt like the endless neoliberalism regime I certainly didn't think I'd be ever able to say that.

I'm glad. In the last few years—and particularly since *You Should Come With Me Now*—there's been a greater take-up of my stuff at all ages, and across a broad spectrum of readers. As to the

politics: although it was pissing down with rain, and I failed to meet up with both Rob Macfarlane and Toby Litt because I got lost and arrived late, I was so excited to be a tiny part of XR because I was surrounded by people who felt the way I felt 50 years ago. The same's true of independent publishing in the UK—everything is happening. For me it isn't even really hope, it's the sense of strong, determined people at work. We need that when, as Helen Macdonald put it recently, "We are pretty much in the apocalypse right now." We need people not accepting barriers, making space for things to happen. You hope you can still find a way to contribute.