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## **POSTHUMANISM IN FANTASTIC FICTION (2018) EDITED BY ANNA KÉRCHY**

Review by Beáta Gubacsi

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**Kérchy, Anna. ed. *Posthumanism in Fantastic Fiction*. Americana eBooks, 2018.**

Posthumanism, an emerging philosophical trend, has been making an impact on approaches to the humanities since its early formulation in the 1950s, mostly reflecting on the Cyberpunk fantasies of rapid scientific and technological advances to enhance the human body and expand consciousness. The later manifestations of posthumanism in the 1980s mostly overlap with postmodernism and Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" (1984), taking a radical, anti-humanist stance, challenging linguistic and cultural bias leading to political oppression. The most contemporary strand, critical posthumanism, is predominantly informed by climate and animal studies to understand the underlying causes of anthropogenic climate change and establishing a sustainable onto-epistemological framework. In her "Introduction" Anna Kérchy describes the focus of this interdisciplinary collection: "the human subject's place in the world, with a focus on fantasies which challenge anthropocentric epistemology and Cartesian dualism to redraw the boundaries between the human, the animal, the technological, the natural environment, and the 'inanimate' object world" (n.p.). It is significant that the featured chapters engage with the fantastic in a wider context since posthumanism's most readily available connotations, such as the cyborg, Artificial Intelligence (AI) or alien, are all linked to technology and, hence, Science or Speculative Fiction. With the emergence of critical posthumanism – challenging even the early formulations of posthumanism itself – genres like the New/Weird or Ecohorror, alongside other previously overlooked areas, become instrumental in facilitating discussions of subjectivity and agency.

Since the chapters are not organised chronologically or thematically, the reader is challenged to recognise connections between them. Considering this, arguably, Enikő Bollobás' piece, "The Fantastic as Performative: Mark Twain and Ambrose Bierce Performing the Unreal" defines the 'fantastic,' and puts the other chapters into perspective, setting up a framework by which to understand the collection. The juxtaposition of Twain's *A Mysterious Stranger* (1916) and Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (1890) yields insight into the rhetoric of the fantastic which creates and maintains a tension between the real and the imagined through the characters' metafictional awareness and engagement with worldbuilding.

Kendra Reynolds' "'We're all the same, *Under the Skin*': Michel Faber's Ecofeminist Web of Equality" and Éva Federmayer's "The Genesis of the Anthropocene: An Ecocritical Reading of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*" are a great overall introduction to some of the most important discussions within critical posthumanism. While Reynolds' paper provides an informative overview of ecofeminism from its beginning to its most recent developments, Federmayer offers the same for the term

'Anthropocene.' Both studies draw parallels between human authority over the environment and animal bodies, gender dynamics, and colonialism through the struggle of *Under the Skin's* (2000) central non-human character, Isserley, who was genetically modified to look like a woman and serve as a live bait for capturing vodsels, "animals to her but human to us," for an alien meat factory (n.p.). This is also reflected in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) through Florens, a black slave girl, and Lina, Native American servant, who adapt to the white appropriation of the land but cherish their genuine union with the American pastoral landscape surrounding them. All of these portrayals of women show a spiritual closeness to nature: Isserley in her final revelation becomes one with her environment, and Florens is described as 'wild' for her unruliness. The convincing argument of these chapters is that these women discover a powerful ally in their environment through which they gain acceptance and knowledge in opposition to the arbitrary patriarchal narratives that shun them from the assumed connection to wilderness.

Gergely Nagy analyses a different kind of colonialism, and internalisation or embodiment of wilderness in his "A God Like the Animals: The Mythological Subject in Frank Herbert's *Emperor of Dune*" through the figure of Leto Atrides II. Nagy argues that Leto does not only drastically transform his own body by initiating a symbiotic relationship with the 'sandtrouts' but also his own cultural and religious position as emperor alongside the meaning and impact of the sandworms on Arrakis. The chapter evidences the significance of the *Dune* series (1965-2016) as a nuanced depiction of humanimal futures, and an illustration of the posthumanist scrutiny of anthropocentric history and metaphysics which tend to privilege a certain embodiment and subjectivity. Similarly, Daniel Nyikos' chapter, "'Growing Grey and Brittle': The Horror of Abjection in H. P. Lovecraft's 'The Colour out of Space,'" focuses on the depiction of epistemological crisis, and the deconstruction of meaning and categories. Nyikos builds his analysis on Jacques Derrida's concept of *differance* and Julia Kristeva's abject, as well as recent studies on Lovecraft. He argues that the grey matter destroying the Garner's farmland "literally deconstructs the body of the self itself, as bodies of those afflicted by this designifying entity from beyond our world literally disintegrate, while readers' conventional strategies of meaning formation are shattered" (n.p.). While I believe it could be problematic to call Lovecraft a posthumanist author, the article emphasises that the short story's cosmic horror is also a metaphor for "the threat of modernity" alongside the author's personal losses, the engagement with modernism, and the destabilisation of the self which definitely elevates Lovecraft as a relevant forerunner to the field (n.p.).

Péter Kristóf Makai brings in a more hopeful approach "'One Sentence Disguising a Multitude of Horrors': Humankind Sentenced to Life in Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach Trilogy" by contextualising the border crossing of the inherently uncanny decay aesthetics of Gothic and the Weird tradition in terms of Timothy Morton's 'dark ecology' involving his concept of the 'mesh' – the principle of interconnectedness of human and non-human, living and non-living beings. Their analysis revolves around the descriptions of Area X as a living entity with considerable agency within and outside of its own porous borders and the complex micro-ecology free of ontological constraints. The interactions with Area X gradually decrease alleged human control over the natural world, enmeshing them with the intricate environmental systems of the Southern Reach. The paper

emphasises that the outcome of the novel is positive: survival is possible but not without “radically reshuffling our notions of temporality, agency and the biosphere” (n.p.).

András Molnár in “‘Everything Was Crawling Within Itself’: Posthumanism in the New Weird Stuff of Thomas Ligotti’s Short Fiction” advocates expanding the study of the Weird canon, drawing academic attention to Ligotti’s connection with contemporary authors and posthumanist thinking. While the first half of the chapter provides an overview of Lovecraft’s influence over the field, establishing differences in Ligotti’s philosophical and aesthetic practice compared to that of the former, the second half focuses on the figure of the puppet in Ligotti’s “The Bells Will Sound Forever” (1997) and “Nethescorial” (1991) through Jane Bennett’s ‘vital materialism’ and Spinozian concept of *conatus*, “the blending of the living and non-living, as well as the human and nonhuman” (n.p.). András Fodor discusses the fusion of physical borders in his article “Space or Place? Posthumanist Revisions of Absence and Presence in China Mieville’s *The City and the City*.” In a well-structured chapter he argues, drawing on Michel Foucault’s heterotopia and going beyond Henri Lefebvre’s urban spatiality, that Tyador Borlú becomes posthuman by entering a no-space at the intersection of Beszel and Ul Qoma: two dystopian rivalling cities with seemingly strict, but also confusingly porous, borders where the citizens have to constantly ‘unsee’ each other. Borlú becomes Tye, an avatar of Breach, and an embodiment of the intersectionality of the two dystopian cities, ‘tying’ them together, ideologically, linguistically, and culturally.

The second half of the collection expands the discussion to children’s literature, films, and theatre. I especially enjoyed two articles engaging with picture books as an important but often dismissed scene for posthumanist discussions. Florian Zitzelsberger’s “‘No One Can Sing with Smog in His Throat’: Voices of Environmentalism and Ecological Awareness in Dr Seuss’ *The Lorax*” is a brilliant analysis of “the themes of preservation vs. destruction, responsibility and activism” through the conflict of Lorax who lives in harmony with his surroundings and the Once-ler who cuts down the Truffula trees to support his obsessive capitalist business venture, making “Thneed” that apparently everyone needs (n.p.). He argues that the narrative features of the text seeks to implement ecological awareness in children and reinforce social change. As he puts it: “Dr Seuss writes the narrator and narratee into this story, he simultaneously writes about authors and readers – in this case concerned adults and children, whom he renders responsible for taking environmental action” (n.p.).

Chengcheng You’s paper, “Picturing a Posthuman Identity: Personhood, Affect and Companionship Ethics in Mary Liddell’s *Little Machinery* and Shaun Tan’s *The Lost Thing*,” picks up the matter of addressing future generations. She argues the necessity of studying how posthumanism is communicated to children since their relationship to technology and interactions with media are different; consequently, their notions of body and embodiment are also varied, noting that children’s literature is significantly less technophobic than Young Adult or other forms of the fantastic typically consumed by adults. For this reason, she focuses at “the representation of technologically enhanced embodiments” and “manifestations of machines, cyborgs, and hybrids” (n.p.). The analysis of the two object narratives/it-narratives is built on Bennett’s coinage of the ‘thing-power’ emphasising the materiality of human existence and the emotive effect of animating objects and Masahiro Mori’s

'uncanny valley' describing reaction to objects from dolls to robots bearing various levels of human likeness.

Korinna Csetényi and Edit Újvári's articles provide a detailed analysis of the most infamous monsters of film history, building on the premise that the monstrous defies civilizational categories by depicting humans small, vulnerable, and endangered. Csetényi in her "'The Monsters Are Us': Mad Scientists and Mutated Beasts in Contemporary Natural Horror Fictions" defines natural Horror or Ecohorror as "a specific subgenre of horror fiction that features natural forces – animals, plants and environmental phenomena – that poses a threat to human characters" (n.p.). She emphasises the 'cautionary tale' aspect of such narratives in which scientific hubris is primarily responsible for major anthropogenic catastrophes – executed by monsters. After theorising the different embodiments of the monster and their effect, such as "fission, magnification and massification," she moves on to discuss Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1823); H. G. Wells' *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896); Stephen King's "The Mist" (1980) and *Pet Semetary* (1983); and *Godzilla* in more details (n.p.). Újvári's article "The Iconographic Motif of Hellmouth, the Man-eating Beast and Giger's Alien Figure" seeks to dissect a different type of hubris, the alien's predatory appetite for humans. The chapter invites the reader to an intellectual deep dive into "primal instincts and archetypical fears," following the trace of Giger's alien which "recycles mythical and iconographic traditions, such as the monster from hell, and the figure of the devil in Christianity" (n.p.).

Speaking of the devil, Alina Gabriela Mihalache proves in her paper "Rhinos Go on Stage: Animal Allegory Behind and Beyond the Iron Curtain" that the devil is in the details describing the different theatrical adaptations of Eugene Ionesco's short story "Rhinoceros" (1959). Bernáth András's "The Challenge of the Old Mole: A Key Problem in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and its Reception" discusses whether the ghostly apparition of Hamlet's father is a mischievous spirit from hell. Both chapters tackle the problem of animal bodies as metaphors of political turmoil and paradigm shifts. Mihalache does so by comparing the dramaturgy of Broadway and Romanian productions of Ionesco's play where the transformation into a stampeding beast is inherently more dramatic and frustrating behind the Iron Curtain than the more comedic Western adaptation. Bernath discusses the linguistic features and cultural context of the old mole in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1609) as the metaphor of the ghost/spirit by arguing whether to accept a limiting or broader meaning for ghost/spirit by analysing various interpretations from New Historicist readings to Derrida's 'hauntology.'

To conclude, the collection showcases current research within the intersections of posthumanism and fantastic literatures, focusing on the necessity of rewriting history and re-imagine futures in relation to the Anthropocene, and expanding not only the meaning of 'posthuman' but also that of genre. This eclectic assemblage provides a plethora of resources concerning imagined and re-imagined histories and futures – from the dawn of the Weird and the golden age of Science Fiction and Horror to recent iterations of children's literature, film, and theatre – for researchers to broaden their horizons beyond Anglo-American nodes of study. The range and quality of the research designates the book as a must-have: it is available through Amazon print for a very affordable price, and the Kindle version is even more economical but, unfortunately, this format does not support pagination.

**BIONOTE**

**Beáta Gubacsi** is a PhD candidate at the University of Liverpool, UK, and “SFRA Support a New Scholar Grant” holder for 2019-2020. While working on her thesis, “Trauma in the Anthropocene: Posthumanism in New Weird Narratives,” she is running the column, “Medical Humanities 2.0,” for *The Polyphony*, the blog of the Institute for Medical Humanities at Durham University. She is co-organiser of the Current Research in Speculative Fiction conference, and recently she has joined the team of the *Fantastika Journal* as Assistant Editor. Her research interests are genre, trauma, climate and animal studies, technology in medicine and healthcare with a focus on gaming and mental health.