

FANTASTIKA JOURNAL

This issue is published by Fantastika Journal. Website registered in Edmonton, AB, Canada. All our articles are Open Access and free to access immediately from the date of publication. We do not charge our authors any fees for publication or processing, nor do we charge readers to download articles. Fantastika Journal operates under the Creative Commons Licence CC-BY-NC. This allows for the reproduction of articles for non-commercial uses, free of charge, only with the appropriate citation information. All rights belong to the author.

Please direct any publication queries to editors@fantastikajournal.com



www.fantastikajournal.com

A SHADOW WITHIN: EVIL IN FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION (2019) EDITED BY FRANCESCA T. BARBINI

Review by Taylor Driggers

Barbini, Francesca T., editor. *A Shadow Within: Evil in Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Luna Press Publishing, 2019. 422 pp.

In the introduction to her edited collection *A Shadow Within: Evil in Fantasy and Science Fiction* (2019), Francesca T. Barbini writes that “evil isn’t a static presence confined to any one given time, but rather something that constantly evolves under the influence of the author’s own experience, society, the technology of the period, and even their understanding of humanity” (vi). Accordingly, the essays that follow in the collection represent a broad spectrum of approaches to, and understandings of, evil in a wide variety of Fantastika texts in the fields of literature, film and television, games and interactive media, and visual art. The result is a diverse collection of essays attempting, with varying degrees of success, to come to grips with the necessarily pliable, adaptable, and ambivalent nature of ‘evil’ as it is invoked in Fantastika genres.

The array of essays that Barbini has assembled in this volume represents an impressively inclusive cross-section of various spheres of discourse on the fantastic. The collection boasts essays from academics, independent researchers, fans, creative writers, and other creative industry professionals, and as such it is just as likely to be of interest to the casual reader as it is to more research-oriented audiences. This diversity of contributors is a strength, as it represents the opportunities for cross-disciplinary collaboration and popular appeal afforded by Fantastika studies, as well as a weakness. The essays are written with a wide variety of goals in mind, with varying degrees of scholarly rigour and specialist expertise in the relevant subject areas, and in a multitude of different writing styles, and there are many places where a stronger editorial hand may have been desirable to lend the collection greater coherence of purpose and consistency in quality. While this is perhaps an understandable drawback for a non-peer-reviewed collection distributed by a small, independent press that may not have the same resources of time and money available to larger publishing houses, it does often make for uneven and jarring reading from essay to essay. Nevertheless, there is much contained within this volume and its essays to recommend.

Following an all-too-brief introduction by Barbini, the collection opens with Alice Capstick’s essay examining what may well be the most archetypal embodiment of evil in Western literary representations: Satan. In “The Antihero’s Journey: The Influence of Milton’s Satan on the Evolution of the Dark Hero,” Capstick posits that the arc followed by John Milton’s ambivalent but sympathetic treatment of Satan in *Paradise Lost* (1667) provided a blueprint for modern antiheroic figures that

followed. By mapping Satan's antiheroic journey along a progression of "'rise', 'reign', and 'ruin', with the potential for 'redemption,'" Capstick convincingly argues that antiheroism is not simply a variant of heroism or villainy, but a separate category worthy of careful attention, although her case for the enduring legacy of Milton's Satan could stand to be more conclusively evidenced (4). If the antihero is one way in which evil can be personified, even humanised, in *Fantastika*, Jason Gould identifies in M. John Harrison's short fiction an opposite tendency. "Rewriting Evil. An Alternative to Personification" (sic) engagingly analyses how "The Incalling" (1978), "The Ice Monkey" (1980), and "Engnaro" (1981) work as fictions in which evil "is [...] free to exist, unembodied, either at the periphery of the fiction, distant from the characters and plot but wholly influential, or else suffused into every atom of a story's environment" (34).

Meanwhile, Sharon Day's essay "Through the Veil of the Digital Revolution and into the Abyss of Artificial Intelligence: The Insidious Desensitisation of Humanity" elaborates on Barbini's observation that particular evils may arise out of specific material conditions and historical contexts in its examination of how artificial intelligence (AI) – and a technologically-mediated contemporary existence more generally – may extrapolate existing human evils into ever more calculating and impersonal variants. Given its title, this essay had the potential to offer an analysis of how AI and digital technology industries participate in and often heighten the social and political violences of day-to-day life. Day, however, largely forgoes these material concerns in favour of a more abstract and generalised argument regarding "the lack of empathy" and the ostensible "rewiring" of brain patterns with each successive generation, which unfortunately leads her essay to come across more as journalistic sensationalism than as evidence-based analysis (46).

A. J. Dalton's "Embodiments of evil and reflections of social change in second-world fantasy" returns to Satanic motifs its analysis of the evolution and increasing complication of the 'Dark Lord' archetype throughout the history of the Fantasy genre. Dalton's political historicisation of popular Fantasy's changing moral landscapes from its roots in the Christian imaginaries of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis to a twenty-first century reckoning with the atrocities wrought by Western (especially American and British) exceptionalism brings forth many original and long-overdue insights which are similarly addressed by Matthew J. Elder and C. Palmer-Patel later in the volume. The analysis is, however, hampered by some idiosyncratic applications of terminology, particularly where genre is concerned, and some observations seem derived more from second-hand impressions of the texts under consideration than their actual content, particularly when discussing *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) and Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series (2005-2008).

Following this are a pair of articles delving into the wider social resonances of evil and monstrosity from Science Fiction Horror cinema of the 1970s and 1980s. The first of these, Robert S. Malan's "Xenophobia," is the weaker of the two, rehearsing well-established talking points regarding the myriad cultural anxieties of the 1980s that are reflected in the Xenomorphs of *Aliens* (1986) but struggling to develop these observations into a sustained and focused reading of the film. More thought-provoking is Kim Lakin-Smith's semi-autobiographical reflection on the nature of evil in *Halloween* (1978) and *The Terminator* (1984). Lakin-Smith raises provocative questions

regarding the catharsis of witnessing violent acts depicted on screen, noting how John Carpenter's film positions its audience as "victim and voyeur, both afraid of and in love with the act of murder" (127). In unleashing these evils, Lakin-Smith argues, both James Cameron and Carpenter give visual form to the mundane evils that threaten to unsettle the tranquil appearances of respectable middle-class society and draw our attention to the potential for evil in ourselves. The banal presence of evil in polite society is also of chief interest in Teika Bellamy's contribution, "Bluebeard – The Eternal Predator." Drawing on a rich tradition of feminist and psychoanalytic fairy tale scholarship, Bellamy traces how the 'Bluebeard' archetype popularised by Charles Perrault has transformed from a cautionary tale about the dangers of curiosity to a tale of how powerful and wealthy men conceal the individual and systemic acts of violence against women upon which that status rests. This is well-trod territory, critically speaking, but the continued relevance of these readings to the often aggressively misogynistic political landscape of the 2010s give Bellamy's analysis a particular urgency.

The collection then shifts its attention toward secondary-world Fantasy and Science Fiction, starting with a pair of essays turning a more critical eye toward characterisations of evil, both with reference to the *Star Wars* franchise (1977-present). Lucinda Holdsworth's "The Problem of Evil in Pseudo-Taoist Secondary Worlds" is the stronger of these two, staging an original critical intervention into Western appropriations of Taoist principles in fantastic worldbuilding. When approached with nuance, as in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* series (1968-2001), Taoist worldbuilding in Fantasy offers a refreshing alternative to Western moral binarism that prioritises balance and openness to difference. When handled clumsily, as Holdsworth shows through her examination of the *Star Wars* films, the television series *The Legend of Korra* (2012-2014), and the fiction of Brandon Sanderson, the result is an incoherent ethics "in which total imbalance is deemed acceptable so long as it is unbalanced in favour of the individuals the viewer cares about" (165). Some of Holdsworth's broader theological claims could stand to be more clearly evidenced, and I find her conclusion that a successful application of Taoist principles in worldbuilding is merely a matter of sincerity of intent somewhat unsatisfactory as an explanation. Nonetheless, the essay is, on the whole, a provocative and nuanced examination of an under-researched phenomenon in fantastic worldbuilding. Rostislav Kůrka's more focused examination of the shifting depictions of evil in the *Star Wars* saga, meanwhile, brings forth interesting observations regarding the nature of evil in different 'eras' of filmmaking within the franchise, but I would have liked to see these further contextualised both in terms of the films' respective historical contexts as well as the conditions of their respective productions.

The historical contextualisation of depictions of evil introduced by Dalton and the construction of 'East' and 'West' as representational categories that Holdsworth analyses come together in Matthew J. Elder and C. Palmer-Patel's essay "Imperialism as 'Evil' in Epic Fantasy." Through close readings of works by David Eddings, Robert Jordan, Brandon Sanderson, and Peter V. Brett, Elder and Palmer-Patel trace how depictions of imperialist atrocities have evolved from being abjected onto orientalist 'others' (but celebrated when enacted by white-coded protagonists) in popular Fantasy of the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, to being more thoroughly examined and critiqued in literature of the twenty-first century. The authors' analysis of these works is lucid and insightful, although I worry that their acknowledged methodological decision to confine their analysis to texts

authored by white men risks creating a false sense of linear progression. On the contrary, there exists a tradition of more resolutely anti-imperialist Fantasy writing from authors contemporary to Eddings and Jordan. Still, Elder and Palmer-Patel have usefully identified a renewed popular interest in these more critical fictions as we enter the 2020s, and a need to be attentive to the cultural and racial coding of 'evil' in popular Fantasy in general.

Whether an audience identifies an act as evil, and whether the audience sympathises with the character committing said act, Elder and Palmer-Patel demonstrate, depends heavily on framing, and what a given work chooses to show or withhold from its audience. This is also the focus of Katarina O'Dette's essay "Yesterday's Tyrant," which analyses the redemption of villains in Fantasy television as "a careful public relations campaign run by the production team" (227). O'Dette's entertaining but rigorous study pinpoints four strategies deployed by television writers to win audience's sympathies: "point-of-view, flashbacks, reform checks, and relationships with protagonists" (210). Crucially, O'Dette is careful to distance the insights gleaned from her analysis from real-world ethics; as she argues, "[t]he narrative strategies used to reform villains are effective because they are fictional" (227). Reform, and the strange selectiveness of fiction when it comes to who is afforded it, are very much at play in Octavia Cade's "Spring Again," which alternately examines the role of free will in Edmund's redemption and the end of winter in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956), and critiques Susan's eventual exclusion from Narnia for seemingly far less grievous sins.

Tam Moules' "'I have done only what was necessary'" and Barbara Stevenson's "The Nature of Evil in *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* by Stephen Donaldson" are two essays that would likely have benefited from stronger editorial oversight. Moules introduces compelling points of analysis regarding N. K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* trilogy (2016-2018); in Jemisin's texts, they argue, evil is perpetuated by individuals constrained by and participating in larger systems of power. The essay's meandering and fragmented structure, however, makes the specifics of the argument occasionally difficult to parse. Likewise, Stevenson offers a forceful critique of the muddled and seemingly protagonist-centred morality of Donaldson's work, but her chapter reads more like an informal rant than a sustained close reading of the text.

The latter portion of the collection contains some of its strongest and most rigorously researched contributions. Jyrki Korpua's analysis of the Shadows of *Babylon 5* (1993-1998) and the Reapers of *Mass Effect* (2007-present) in "Machines of Chaos" adds some disquieting notes of relativism to the anxieties over the morality of AI discussed elsewhere in the volume. Meanwhile, Tatiana Fajardo's fascinating exploration of "The Bloodlust of Elizabeth Báthory" chronicles the sensationalism with which fantastic literatures and media have appropriated the murderous Hungarian noblewoman's legacy to embody various Jungian archetypes. The ambiguity with which Fajardo approaches these archetypes, however – are they being invoked as eternal, naturally-occurring constants, or as products of a specific cultural imaginary? – does render the essay's account of Báthory's popular reception somewhat murky in places.

Dominic Riemenschneider's "From Light to Dark" and Steph P. Bianchini's "The Inquisitor's Creatures" are both highlights of the volume. Riemenschneider historicises the aesthetic principles of Gothic architecture and the multitude of reasons why this aesthetic shifted from evoking the holy in the Middle Ages to being a shorthand for ancient evil in contemporary Fantastika media by way of Gothic fiction of the Romantic era. Bianchini, meanwhile, concerns her essay with the archetype of the witch, deftly dispelling common misconceptions and demonstrating that, contrary to popular assumptions, the witch as an archetype of evil is more a product of early modern Protestantism than of medieval Catholicism. The essay ends, however, with Bianchini lamenting the necessity of conjecture when attempting to piece together an account of the origins of what ultimately became 'witchcraft' in the modern imagination; in her words, "reconstructing the history of [witchcraft] is like, at best, trying to compose a mosaic that is fragmented and, at worst, doing so with important missing tiles" (356). The following pair of essays pick up the threads of Bianchini's interest in modern appropriations of pre-Christian figures and practices, and in archetypal representations of witchcraft, respectively. Anna Milon's "Naming the Terror in the Forest" details how the Horned God, a hybrid of several different mythological archetypes evoking nature and the non-human world, evolved from a figure of abject terror in the Edwardian literary imagination to a sympathetic, albeit still strikingly 'other,' figure of ecological concern. Meanwhile, in "Evil Rewritten," Anna Köhler focuses on efforts to reclaim or rehabilitate the witches of fairy tales in contemporary revisionist literature. Köhler's essay, like Bellamy's earlier in the volume, treads familiar ground for feminist fairy-tale scholarship, but it is notable for the uniquely critical eye it turns toward the strengths and limitations of the various approaches contemporary authors take towards redeeming the witch.

I confess to finding the closing essay of the volume, Sean Z. Fitzgerald's "The Fictional Scientist as a Dichotomy of Good and Evil in Contemporary Realist Speculative Fiction," perplexing, both in terms of discerning its intended argument, and as a cap to such a widely varied collection of essays. Fitzgerald's examination of the morality of science as portrayed in Fantastika fiction from the nineteenth century to the present day, interspersed with reflections on his own writing practices, seems primarily focused on the privately held virtues of individual scientists, and on the public-facing optics of the sciences more generally. Yet as many of the essays in this volume have sought to point out, appearances can be deceiving, and good and evil are often larger matters than can be accounted for by individual agency. What unites most of the contributions to Barbini's collection is a sense that evil is elusive: concealed by the narrative and aesthetic strategies of the fantastic as often as it is revealed by them, seeming to appear in the face of the 'other' at the very moment it may be residing in our own individual or collective consciousness. *A Shadow Within: Evil in Fantasy and Science Fiction* is itself by turns frustrating, bewildering, and illuminating. Overall, it represents a worthy contribution to research in a frequently cited, but rarely examined, phenomenon in Fantastika, gesturing towards numerous opportunities for further study and likely to be accessible to academic, professional, and casual audiences alike.

BIONOTE

Taylor Driggers holds a PhD from the University of Glasgow, UK, where his thesis focused on Fantasy literature's potential to offer queer and feminist re-visionings of Christian theology and religious practices. His research interests include queer theologies of incarnation, monstrosity, religious devotion and sexual desire, post-structuralism, and the fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien, Ursula K. Le Guin, Angela Carter, and Samuel R. Delany. His first book, *Faith and Fantasy: Queering Theology in Fantastic Texts*, is forthcoming from Bloomsbury Academic.