Introduction

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The lay of the land

In August 2014, sf scholars from around the world came together for a two-day session of workshops and panels with the intention of exploring the state of contemporary sf and its relationships to the current historical conjuncture. *Sf Now* is a further fruit of that exploration. It offers a mapping of the contemporary field—not exhaustive, of course, but a rich sample of the variety and vigor of the intellectual work that sf can inspire. Sf is, surely, the genre of the moment. Its power and conceptual usefulness lies in the fact that it has, since its inception, *always* been the genre of the moment; being "of the moment" is both what sf is and what it does best. As has been said before, sf is good to think *with*, good to think *through*. And this collection of sf scholarship represents genuine *thinking*—about, against, and beyond the particular historical moment in which we find ourselves. It is an unabashedly political collection. The insights contained within these pages are insights about the here and now, and how it is shaped by our projections of the there and then, whether far future, alternate present, or counterfactual past. And just as important as what is illuminated is that which remains in the dark; the failures and atavisms of these pieces, and of the works they explore, combine with their bright cognitions to delineate the chiaroscuro of the human social, political, and cultural imagination.[1]

Certain touchstones crop up in these articles again and again. The all-but inescapable "capitalist realism" diagnosed by Mark Fisher appears

[1] The failures of the issue as a whole must also be acknowledged, particularly in terms of its gender imbalance. Despite the wealth of critical work on sf produced by women, it is indicative of the differential pressures of labor that persist in the new millennium that, despite our continued efforts and flexibility within the constraints of the production schedule, it was primarily female colleagues who found themselves forced to withdraw through pressures of work and other commitments. If nothing else, we have learned how essential it is to recognize this in the planning stages of a project.

even to dominate radical political thought—there is no alternative to believing There Is No Alternative. Fredric Jameson's correlated insistence on the impossibility of representing utopia or the transition to it has become an article of faith. This conceptual ground tends to lead the critical approach to negation, refusing even the possibility of a positive construction: hence the *No Exit* of our cover. In their different ways, the contributors to *Sf Now* each recognize the ideological hegemony of neoliberalism, and struggle to discover genuine alternatives within the imaginative limitations of the present. This ground presents multiple facets: Humanity 2.0 either envisions a chronic death-drive of an exacerbated present or abjects the present, holding up alternatives that nonetheless seem to inevitably fold back into the present. Energy futures consider the future written as a palimpsest over the inhuman timescales of our own growing waste products, or struggle to break free of the petro-dollars that structure the present and inform even the furthest-flung space-operatic sublime (are, in fact, the very source and power of it). Animals as Others gaze back at us and demand the sloughing off of anthropocentrism, yet the anthropological machine rumbles on, humanizing animals and animalizing humans. Films, novels, comics, music, and games naturalize capitalism as ontology, or critique it, or protest it as a human construction (and, thus, transformable, destroyable) but cannot seem to go further than enumerating the problems, telling us in a sense what we already know, because we live it, day by day. The struggle against hierarchical binaries is a red thread here, too, the need to move beyond the reproduction of the structures that organize and oppress us, and the difficulty of doing so. And diffused through it all, the great political question—*who decides?*

The political power of sf—its "cognitive estrangement," in increasingly disputable shorthand—comes at least partly from its presentation of a system, a structure, and its articulation of alternative social, political, and cultural possibilities. Sf can strip normative attitudes of their status as natural or inevitable. It can inject the critical perspective of history and change where previously there was only essentialized myth and stasis. The radical power of the genre shouts with one voice—*these are human constructions, material and ideal, and things could be otherwise, could be made to be otherwise*. In the era of upfront ideological battles, before the Wall came down in 1989, perhaps this clarion call sufficed, but neoliberalism is perfectly aware of the constructedness of social relations, the malleability of subjectivities, and the pliable leverage of narrative. One might almost say that neoliberalism's great innovation was the full-throttle effort to define reality itself as capitalist, and to consciously cast social institutions and subjectivities into the appropriate

shape. To say with sf *Look! It could be different!* no longer holds the impact of before. Today this fact is well known, but relegated to the past by the apparent rout of anti-capitalist politics—*yes, it used to be different, and look where that got us*. There is a sense of resignation, a sense of realism that matches all too well the capitalist realism against which radical politics is supposedly arrayed. Inquiring critical minds seek a better, richer realism but, to paraphrase Ursula K. Le Guin's Shevek, *how can we, if we don't know what hope is?*

And yet there is hope. There are moments, hints, traces of a *beyond* here; there is a radical alterity buried within the present that sf can unearth. In sf we find images of the birth pangs of new possibilities, not yet clear, not yet free, not yet in the full strength of their youth. They are moments where a genuine alternative is glimpsed, where pleasure is taken in the willed confusion of boundaries and in the conscious responsibility of constructing something new and different. The truism that the world is what we make it penetrates deeply enough to regain its radical force. The cracks in capitalist reality must be forced wide open by any means necessary, and representational impossibilities left behind. Hope must become radical, not merely tearing down the fantasy of what is currently thought to be real but also *making the fantastical real*. Here, theory is only playing catch-up to the events of the Arab Spring, Occupy, *Indignado*, the Scottish Yes Movement, the numerous student movements, the Ferguson Protests, the global Fossil Free and environmental campaigns, the anti-TTIP movement, and on and on. To remain convinced of capitalist realism and the impossibility of utopia in such a situation is to deny the political agency that *can* exist (though may not yet be fully-grown). It is time to break with the constrictive space carved out between capitalist realism and the impossibility of utopia. It is time to consider how change can and does occur, and what sf can teach us about representing that change, in order, as Darko Suvin demanded years ago, for sf to be wiser than the world it speaks to, and to allow us to wrap our minds around that break transformed into a bridge, and finally walk away from Omelas.

"Let Me Outta Here!": variations on a theme

This issue begins with crucial and often-overlooked groundwork—the laying of the material foundations of the subject matter itself—with Andrew Milner's sf-specific adaptation of Franco Moretti's world systems model of the global literary system. He situatues the history, production, reception, and dissemination of sf within the encompassing

socio-historical framework of uneven international economic and cultural power balances. Sf is not just an act of imagination but a landscape of dominant cores and subjugated peripheries that shapes and limits not only what is imagined (and how) but also the impact and influence permitted to differently situated imaginations.

The following three articles delve deep into the bleak realities of the neoliberal present. Gerry Canavan builds upon Fisher's concept of capitalist realism and Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee's necrocapitalism (that is, capitalism predicated on the creation of "death worlds") to propose the idea of necrofuturism. His critique of Bong Joon-ho's 2013 film *Snowpiercer* and the graphic novel upon which it is based, *Le Transperceneige* (1982), explores how the violence of capitalist colonialism is, in its late-era convulsions, redeployed at the core and depends upon a vision of the future as an increasingly chronic repetition of the present. Canavan insists that the supposed realism of capitalism is nothing of the sort, and that we must attend to the alternatives that must and do exist. Carl Freedman dissects three major recent films, *Her* (2013), *Gravity* (2013), and *Side Effects* (2013), laying bare the total grip of late capitalist realism-as-ontology on the structure, imagination, and range of possible worlds presented. Freedman sees these narratives as reinforcing the present, even when they might seem to critique it. Finally, Zak Bronson sees capitalism as having already eradicated the future. His reading of China Miéville's *Railsea* (2012) frames the present as a slow apocalypse. Drawing on the work of the Salvagepunk movement to render our present condition as always-already amidst the ruins, Bronson considers the utopian potential of such a re-framing, which frees up the present and its dominant narratives to be plundered for the jerry-rigging of a new, non-repetitious future.

The issue then shifts focus as Graeme Macdonald and Brent Bellamy investigate the intersections between sf and energy, and the different ways that sf film and literature allow our invisible motive forces—from fossil to nuclear to renewable—to be brought to light and thought anew. Their articles represent an emergent and critical area of research, broadly known as "Energy Humanities," which poses a problem inextricably linked to the alleged inability to think beyond capitalism; technological, global modernity is a product of cheap and plentiful energy, which structures the very temporal, spatial, and motive categories through which we think politics and society—but what happens when it runs out? With remaining oil reserves already sold before they are out of the ground, worsening climate change, and no sign of the radical cultural and infrastructural shifts required on the horizon, these interventions already bear the marks of a funeral oration. MacDonald argues for sf as

a privileged lens for examining Energy Humanities. Through readings of numerous sf films and novels (including H.P Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936), M. John Harrison's *The Centauri Device* (1974), *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977), and Iain M. Banks's *Consider Phlebas* (1987)), and an exploration of the US energy unconscious, he unearths the pervasive and perverse structuring and motivating effects of oil and other energy forms on our present social and political configuration and imagination. From there, MacDonald considers the ways in which sf enables the thinking-through of the challenges and possibilities posed by our petroleum-infused present. Bellamy takes a long, hard look at Michael Madsen's film *Into Eternity* (2010). He considers how the vast and inhuman timescales imposed upon human activity by the necessities of storing nuclear waste exposes the limits of present conceptual frameworks. He forces us to consider our inability to think on a geological timescale and the limits of the nation-state framework to deal with a global and species-relevant issue; and he asks *for what kind of future are these actions laying the foundations?*

The next two articles deal with historical counterfactuals. Glyn Morgan takes Robert Harris' *Fatherland* (1992) as his initial focus, and argues for the importance of counterfactual histories for expanding our awareness of the links between the construction of competing narratives of history and the formation of identity. He closes with a look at how conflicting historical narratives with antagonistic emphases and conclusions are used (through slogans, images, propaganda, rhetoric) for the purpose of swaying opinion and invoking particular identity formations in the present. Mark Jerng takes a different tack altogether. He considers how conceptual limitations and biases (ways of knowing) can be created and reinforced by counterfactual narratives. He demonstrates how particular constellations of racial knowledge (i.e., particular knowledge "about" race) actually structure narratives—his examples are MacKinlay Kantor's *If the South Had Won the Civil War* (1960), Terry Bisson's *Fire on the Mountain* (1988), Harry Turtledove's *Guns of the South* (1992), Peter Tsouras's "Confederate Black and Grey" (2004), and Steven Barnes *Lion's Blood* (2002)—and provide the basis for their counterfactual imaginings to be considered logical or reasonable. The relevance of this approach to the present day, with the Ferguson protests merely the most visible flashpoint at the time of writing, is undeniable. To drive home the importance of the approach, Jerng concludes by turning his analysis from literature to the real-life use of counterfactuals in a recent US Supreme Court anti-discrimination case.

The articles by Sherryl Vint and Tom Tyler explore the potential of an Animal Studies approach to overcoming the anthropomorphism that

is another limit to thinking beyond the status quo. Through readings of *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (Wyatt 2011) and *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* (Wyatt 2014), Vint explores the creation of human/non-human or human/inhuman binaries as a means of producing human subjectivity. This differentiating process—which Georgio Agamben calls the anthropological machine—operates through the rejection of the Other, and implicitly justifies violence against those excluded from the privileged category. Vint pushes against these deeply ingrained binaries—thinking through the various successes and failures of *Rise, Dawn*, and Karen Joy Fowler's *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* (2013)—towards a posthuman, post-anthropocentric position. Such a position would be capable of embracing an identity beyond human exceptionalism, positing instead a solidarity between human and animal interests that is grounded in a recognition of our mutually entangled and global life-worlds. In the following article, Tyler threatens us with the radical anamorphosis of viewing the world from a totally non-human perspective. In his rich and playful look at the game *Plague Inc* (2012), Tyler takes misanthropy—an idea that appears to be concerned with hatred of humanity—and shows that it is a discourse which in fact re-centers humanity. He asks us to think beyond misanthropy's anthropocentrism by exploring, through the eyes of a deadly pathogen, the notion of misanthropy without humanity.

Rhys Williams proposes a new political approach to fantastic fiction centered on discourses of purity and impurity. Retaining the ethical charge of Suvin's "cognitive estrangement," his close reading of H.G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) demonstrates some of the mechanisms by which sf is limited in its political and social imagination. He argues that aesthetic, conceptual, and symbolic impurities within individual texts register a suppressed radical political potential. In a similar vein, Veronica Hollinger's discussion of various depictions of posthumanity—centrally, Greg Egan's *Schild's Ladder* (2001), Paolo Bacigalupi's "The People of Sand and Slag" (2008), Kim Stanley Robinson's *2312* (2012)—shows how the future (non-being) restructures and is an inherent part of the present (being). Here, hope, or at least anticipation, is understood explicitly as part of the reality of the present, with real consequences. Dan Hassler-Forest concludes the collection with an investigation of world-building, and with Janelle Monáe's work in particular. Constructing alternative worlds is an inherently political act, and Hassler-Forest articulates the plea with which this introduction began—the plea to not only criticize but also to take seriously the need for creative power, and to create alternatives to Empire. He argues for the potential of world-building in the struggle to

think and act against the confines of capitalist realism and the hegemony of instrumental neoliberalism. Monáe's particular brand of it, drawing on Afrofuturist tropes and employing an indeterminate heteroglossia, has lessons for those who would listen. In these final three articles, the distinction between the future as repetition or disruption, which echoes back throughout the whole issue, is clearly revealed. To our minds, the questions with which we are left are: how to disrupt repetition, but also, perhaps more urgently, how to repeat disruption, and how to construct an alternative future—here, and now—that holds true to the original aims of that disruption.

Interspersed among the articles are five interviews. Since the conference from which this issue is derived was held at the University of Warwick, Rhys Williams took the opportunity to interview Steve Fuller, the Auguste Comte Chair in Social Epistemology. The result is filled with intellectual fireworks, counter-intuitions, and strong assertions: it is a wild ride. In an interview by Taryne Jade Taylor, Pulitzer-prize winning author Junot Díaz provides rich insights into diaspora, race, colonialism, and apocalypse, drawing out the deep connections between sf and the experience of marginalization as the suturing of antithetical life-worlds. Multi-award winning author Stephen Graham Jones (Piegan Blackfeet) talks to Grace L. Dillon (Anishinaabe) about horror, genre, and the Native American experience (and how it is, or is not important for his writing), while introducing the brand new literary categories of "seeing the bear" and "fighting the bear" stories. Joan Gordan interviews Hugo and Nebula award-winner Kij Johnson, delving into childhood, alien viewpoints and the deep resonances of animals in life and literature. Finally, we have an interview by Jessica Langer with the multi-award winning Nnedi Okorafor, discussing diaspora, the mystical impulse in African sf, and the impossibility of separating out her different identities. The issue closes with Malisa Kurtz's review of Rob Latham's *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction* (2014)—a landmark, field-defining, and frankly brilliantly monstrous collection that opens up an array of new avenues for thinking about sf—and Chris Pak's review of Gerry Canavan and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Green Planets: Science Fiction and Ecology* (2014), a vital intervention that highlights what sf can tell us about one of the most crucial issues of our times.

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Rhys Williams is currently completing a PhD at the University of Warwick. He is interested in Marxist theory, utopianism, value-theory, and discourses of purity and impurity. His thesis aims to pull all these together into a contemporary politicized approach to reading fantastic literature.