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Science Fiction, New Space Opera, and Neoliberal Globalism

by Jerome Winter

Review by Paul March-Russell

Winter, Jerome. *Science Fiction, New Space Opera, and Neoliberal Globalism*. University of Wales Press, 2016. 256 pp.

This is not only the first comprehensive study of the so-called 'New Space Opera' but also the first title in a new series, *New Dimensions in Science Fiction*, published by University of Wales Press. The editors, Pawel Frelik and Patrick B. Sharp, describe the genre as "a global storytelling form of techno-scientific modernity," and that the series seeks multidisciplinary approaches from scholars "on the relations of science and society as expressed in SF." Winter's book embodies the world-spanning, sociological and literary-scientific aspirations of the series by focusing upon the relationships between contemporary SF, neoliberalism, and globalisation.

The roots of New Space Opera are often traced back to the 1984 call in *Interzone* for a "radical hard SF," which would reclaim a pre-New Wave emphasis upon the technological sciences but with a post-New Wave sensibility of playful experiment and political scepticism. Publication in 1987 of Iain M. Banks's *Consider Phlebas*, although originally written in the 1970s, seemed to confirm this new space-operatic, hard SF whilst the resultant movement was consolidated by the 2003 *Locus* forum on the topic. The emergence of New Space Opera is often related, however, to the so-called 'British Boom' of the late Nineties and early Noughties, whilst in his study, Winter takes a more inclusive approach, tracing its origins to Samuel R. Delany's *Nova* (1968) and M. John Harrison's *The Centauri Device* (1975), and taking into account contemporary Caribbean SF by Tobias Buckell, Nalo Hopkinson, and Karen Lord. Taking as his premise the suggestion by Roger Luckhurst, in his 2005 cultural history of science fiction, that New Space Opera should be read in relation to the politics of globalisation and neo-colonialism, Winter tracks the transformation of Space Opera from

such pioneers as E.E. 'Doc' Smith to its contemporary practitioners alongside the development of neoliberal economics in the same period.

The lengthy introduction should really be considered a chapter in its own right. Besides introducing the thesis, the primary topics and the overall structure of the book, it does a fantastic job, firstly, in offering a potted history of neoliberalism from the Bretton Woods agreement of July 1944, which effectively initiated the current economic world-system, through to present-day tensions surrounding globalisation (although, admittedly, from a sceptical left-wing perspective). Secondly, the introduction does admirable work in summarising the ideas of key neoliberal thinkers, such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, and the responses of key critical theorists, such as Manuel Castells and Michel Foucault. Thirdly, the introduction places the effects of neoliberal thought into a global context, emphasising not only the political and economic disparities that have resulted between developed and developing nations, but also demonstrating a firm grasp of postcolonial theory from such thinkers as Aijaz Ahmed, Fredric Jameson and Gayatri Spivak. Winter introduces and discusses concepts such as 'globalism' and 'cosmopolitics,' derived respectively from Manfred Stegner and Bruce Robbins, which shape and underpin his critical analysis of not only neoliberalism's place within the post-war world but also the responses of critics and writers (in Ken MacLeod's words) "to think globally and act locally." Lastly, following on from historians of neoliberal thought such as Daniel Stedman Jones, Winter argues that, although the ascent of neoliberalism is most often associated with the Reagan and Thatcher administrations of the 1980s, its gradual development needs to be charted from the 1930s onwards. Winter tracks this intellectual progression by examining the development of Space Opera within the US pulps, beginning first with the entrepreneurial spirit and technocratic thrill of such pioneering serials as Smith's *The Skylark of Space* (1928). He then contrasts such bold individualism with the deregulated authorities that appear in Jack Williamson's *The Legion of Time* (1934) and Smith's 'Lensman' novels. Lastly, Winter offers a compelling reading of Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series in terms of Futurian ideology, with its dream of a utopian socialist community left unrealised, and of Leigh Brackett's Eric John Stark stories in terms of a complex and unresolved discourse on gender and race. These unfulfilled, left-leaning texts are contrasted with Robert Heinlein's *The*

Rolling Stones (1952) which, although embedding a metafictional parody of Space Opera, nevertheless – according to Winter – asserts a right-wing libertarian, pro-capitalist vision of outward expansion. Winter’s handling of this wide-ranging material is impressive but dense – not helped by his tendency to hyphenate descriptive terms – so that, on reflection, it might have been better if the analysis of early Space Opera had been separated from the rest of the introduction so as to be developed at greater length.

The first chapter not only examines Delany’s *Nova* and Harrison’s *The Centauri Device* but also the later Kefahuchi Tract novels, as well as C.J. Cherryh’s *Cyteen* (1988) and Bruce Sterling’s *Schismatrix* (1985). Harrison, who had praised Delany’s earlier work only to dismiss *Nova* as a backward step, is positioned by Winter as Delany’s dialectical counterpart. Whereas Delany sees in the cyborg a figure of libertarian possibilities, dissolving the binary oppositions between self/other, nature/artifice, white/black, straight/gay, Harrison insists that the escapism inherent in such fantasies is implicated in the ideological deceptions that veil the corrosive effects of neoliberalism. Harrison’s negative solutions – in the earlier novel, the Earth is blown-up; in the later trilogy, the singularity of the Tract expands at the expense of both meaning and the fabric of reality – is contrasted with Delany’s more affirmative, albeit ambivalent, response insofar as he holds out the opportunities for racial and sexual diversity against the backdrop of a neoliberal economy. Winter’s coda not only examines two texts written within the onset of neoliberalism as the dominant ideology of the West but also expands the definition of New Space Opera to make the necessary link with the posthuman content of cyberpunk and to include female writers such as Cherryh, who are more often associated with earlier forms of Space Opera, such as planetary romance. The common theme of genetic engineering and corporate ownership links Cherryh and Sterling effectively into Winter’s overall thesis.

The second chapter explores two of the writers most identified with New Space Opera – Iain M. Banks and Ken MacLeod. Both writers are singled-out by Winter for their Scottish nationalism, which sets them against the neoliberal policies of the UK government. Although not a particularly new observation, Winter not only offers a careful and assiduous analysis of Banks’s Culture novels and MacLeod’s Fall Revolution quartet in terms of neoliberal

globalism, he also presents a more-than-welcome account of MacLeod’s subsequent Engines of Light trilogy.

By contrast, the third chapter – examining Gwyneth Jones’s Aleutian trilogy (but not its prequel *Spirit* (2008)) – is one of the most refreshing analyses in the book. Whereas much of the criticism on Jones’s work has concentrated upon the alien biology and cultural hybridity of the extraterrestrials and their encounter with humanity, Winter looks instead at the responses of the female humans or human-alien hybrids, such as Braemar in *White Queen* (1991) and Catherine in *Phoenix Café* (1997). As with the earlier discussion of C.J. Cherryh, Winter also cross-references the work of writers more often associated with planetary romance, most notably Lois McMaster Bujold, as well as demonstrating that Jones’s examination of women, feminism and economics is prefigured by the so-called ‘galactic suburbias’ that followed Brackett’s work during the 1950s and ‘60s. Winter makes space, in particular, for three of the key feminist writers of the 1960s and ‘70s, Ursula Le Guin, Joanna Russ, and Kate Wilhelm. Russ, however, is criticised for her depiction of an Islamic society in *The Two of Them* (1978) in contrast – in Winter’s view – with Jones’s more informed understanding of women and race (not least because of her work, in the 1990s, for Amnesty International). Winter contextualises Jones’s trilogy against the backdrop not only of the relationship between Western neoliberalism and the developing nations but also the anti-feminist backlash of the 1980s and ‘90s sponsored by the neoliberal attacks upon social welfare and the promulgation of a pro-family agenda. The role played by females in the national allegory as wives and mothers is contested in Jones’s novels both by career-driven women such as Braemar and the Aleutian sexual biology in which the same genotype can be (self-)reproduced indefinitely.

The final chapter reverses the focus by looking at science fiction from a decolonised region – the Caribbean – subject to the neoliberal and neo-colonial policies of institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. Winter explores Tobias Buckell’s ‘Xenowealth Series’, Karen Lord’s *The Best of All Possible Worlds* (2013), and an acknowledged influence upon both authors, Nalo Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber* (2000), which Winter contends shares many of the central motifs of New Space Opera. Each writer is discussed in relation to some

of the governing themes of the book – globalisation, biopolitics, and hybridity – whilst Winter also sets them into context with both the literature of the Caribbean, in particular an indigenous magical realist tradition stemming from authors such as Alejo Carpentier, and postcolonial theory, most notably from the work of Edouard Glissant. Following Glissant, but also the earlier literary example of Delany's *Nova*, Winter argues that, whilst these authors dramatise the hegemonic effects of neoliberalism upon personal and national identity, social and familial relationships, and economic inequality, they also gesture at ways in which these processes can be negotiated, if not actually subverted. Consequently, Winter ends his study on a note of hopeful optimism which is some compensation for the lack of a coda that might have drawn together more comprehensively the various threads of such a dense and wide-ranging analysis.

It should go without saying, then, that Winter has made an invaluable contribution to the understanding of not only New Space Opera – which has often been discussed over the past fifteen years but rarely in terms of such a detailed, insightful and syncretic approach – but also the relationships between contemporary science fiction, the unequal global distribution of wealth and power, and postcolonial theory. Winter's enviable knowledge of world-historical events, cultural criticism and (above all) the SF genre makes his book not only an essential read but also the counterpart to such other critically informed re-readings of the genre as by Jessica Langer, Roger Luckhurst, Sherryl Vint and Lisa Yaszek. Its limitation, apart from its sheer density in a relatively confined word-space, is its own openly left-leaning position. Once he gets past such writers as Heinlein, Winter tends to dismiss *tout court* what he sees as a right-wing tradition in space opera that includes David Brin, Dan Simmons, and Vernor Vinge (presumably the metafiction of Simmons's *Hyperion* (1989) aligns it with Heinlein's *The Rolling Stones* as merely an exercise in politically regressive formalism). Yet, whilst Winter includes Jones's female successors such as Justina Robson and Sherri Tepper, a consideration of the politically conservative Karen Traviss, for example, could have usefully furthered his analysis of gender, race, and neoliberalism.

Lastly, although I want to reiterate the importance of Winter's study to the field of SF criticism, I do feel I should say something about the poor copy-editing that detracts from the

book's success. Since this is the first title in a new series, I do hope that the press learns something from its faults. Missing or miscellaneous words are one thing – for some reason the copy-editor or typesetter has a penchant for repeatedly omitting words like 'of' and 'the' – but the wrong dates for books are another (*Cyteen* is 1988 not 1998; *White Queen* is 1991 not 1993). Although annoying, they are not totally unforgivable – however, when the titles of essays or the names of key characters are changed or misspelt in the matter of a couple of sentences, that's something else. Worse is that Winter often refers to or quotes from critical works – Stedman Jones in the introduction is one such example – only for the cited work not to appear in the bibliography. When a name or title is given, that at least is something to go on, but over-reliance on the Harvard (author-date) method can make cross-referencing almost impossible without consistent copy-editing. Such inattentiveness on the part of the press does a disservice to Winter's otherwise brilliant and invaluable analysis of his chosen texts.

Bionote

Paul March-Russell teaches Comparative Literature and Liberal Arts at the University of Kent, UK. He is the editor of both *Foundation* and the SF Storyworlds series (Gylphi Press). In 2017, he is an Arthur C. Clarke Award judge and co-organiser, with Andrew M. Butler, of a forthcoming conference on Clarke's life and work.