

ContactZone

Rivista dell'Associazione italiana per lo studio della fantascienza e del fantastico

James Tiptree, Jr. and Alice Sheldon
edited by Oriana Palusci and Umberto Rossi



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ContactZone is an international double-blind peer-reviewed e-journal which publishes scholarly work on Science Fiction and the Fantastic connecting different languages, non-mimetic genres, and fields of study. It is the journal of the Italian Association for the Study of Science Fiction and the Fantastic. The areas of research range from literature to cinema, from media to comics and video games touching a wide spectrum of critical approaches, which includes literary criticism, ecocriticism, film studies, gender studies, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, linguistics, translation studies, critical race studies, queer studies. The journal welcomes papers from scholars, authors, teachers, and librarians supporting an innovative insight into texts written in English, but also in other languages, in order to promote a lively dialogue among critics and other specialists on an international level. *ContactZone* will focus on themes and topics dealing with the representation of imaginative and/or alternative worlds in the realms of science fiction and the fantastic.

Director: Luca Sarti

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Introduzione

Ritratto di scrittrice di fantascienza come creatura anfibia

Oriana Palusci e Umberto Rossi

DOI: 10.26379/1894

Nel lavoro critico di periodizzazione della fantascienza si è spesso ragionato in termini di decenni. Gli anni Quaranta, l'età d'oro; gli anni Cinquanta, la fantascienza sociologica (o *social science fiction*); gli anni Sessanta, la New Wave e l'arrivo del postmodernismo. Gli anni Settanta, invece, sono stati il decennio della fantascienza al femminile, o femminista, che negli anni Ottanta viene sommersa dall'ondata cyberpunk. Una scansione comoda, ordinata, ma piuttosto fuorviante, perché i percorsi individuali non si conformano a questi incasellamenti – prova ne sia quello di Alice Bradley Davey Sheldon, alias James Tiptree Jr., alias Raccoona Sheldon, cui è dedicato questo numero speciale di *ContactZone*. Va detto che il ricorso a uno pseudonimo maschile, James Tiptree Jr., ha sicuramente agevolato la carriera della scrittrice americana in un ambito come la *science fiction* della fine degli anni '60 del Novecento. Così era stato per un'altra autrice dalle tematiche poco convenzionali come l'inglese Katharine Burdekin, che aveva adottato lo pseudonimo di Murray Constantine nel suo capolavoro *Swastika Night* (1937). L'aggiunta di Jr., come scrive Julie Phillips (2006) nella biografia di Tiptree, fu suggerita dal marito. A noi viene subito in mente l'altro Jr., cioè Kurt Vonnegut, che si stava affermando in quel periodo. Se junior viene aggiunto a un nome, significa che esiste un 'padre' che ha lo stesso nome, come nel caso dell'autore di *Slaughterhouse-5*. Nel nostro caso si può intravedere un intento parodico: Tiptree la scrittrice figlio di James della rinomata marmellata Tiptree?

“Here we see our friends sprouting tentacles”: Some New Poems from the Juvenilia of James Tiptree, Jr. / Alice Sheldon née Bradley*

Timothy S. Miller

DOI: 10.26379/1895

Abstract

With the permission of the literary estate and the archival source secured, I present the complete texts of five previously unknown poems written while Alice Bradley was an undergraduate at Sarah Lawrence College in the 1930s and published only in the college’s student literary magazine. These new poems complement the previously unpublished verse from the 1940s and 50s that was posthumously collected in the chapbook *Neat Sheets: The Poetry of James Tiptree, Jr.*, and provide a fascinating window into Bradley/Sheldon/Tiptree’s early literary interests and ambitions. Based on the formal experimentation with orthography and references to humans with tentacles and mechanized angels, those interests clearly included both high modernist experimental poetry and some aesthetic features of the issues of pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales* that she was sneaking alongside her loftier literary reading. Other details of the poems will prove intriguing to readers of Tiptree’s science fiction: for instance, the playful byline “a. bradley” attached to one of the poems invents a new middle initial for Bradley, doubling the first letter of her name, and hints at the author’s notorious love of pseudonymity later in life. The poems are prefaced with an introduction and commentary approximately 3000 words in length that primarily serve to explain their provenance, document some of their apparent literary influences, and suggest their interest for perhaps tracing a longer trajectory than previously understood for Tiptree’s much later career as a science fiction author.

Il continuum Sheldon-Tiptree-Raccoona

Riccardo Gramantieri

DOI: 10.26379/1896

Abstract

Between 1968 and the end of 1976, Alice Sheldon not only wrote science fiction professionally using a male pseudonym (James Tiptree, Jr) and then a female one (Raccoona Sheldon), but she interpreted actual roles, giving them the semblance of reality, with their own addresses and bank accounts. Recurring to the tools of analytical psychology, the purpose of this article is to try to show that, for Tiptree/ Sheldon the opposite occurred: the male part of her personality, which can be called Animus, asserting itself on her ego, pushed Alice Sheldon to assume the pseudonym James Tiptree, Jr. At the same time, this proposed interpretation of the writer's life seeks to give a reason to Silverberg's famous misplaced phrase according to which Tiptree was definitely a Hemingway-type, a definition that would give a socio-cultural justification to the particular style of the writer whose multifaceted personality would be described as a continuum.

Aliena dello spazio interno

Laura Coci

DOI: 10.26379/1897

Abstract

The life and narrative of Alice Bradley Sheldon are marked by restlessness and awareness of being a stranger in her own time and, perhaps, even on Earth. Disguising herself thanks to a male identity, she investigates the themes of gender difference and the invisibility of women in Western society, of reproduction and of a possible alternative evolution, of science, pain and death.

And here, within the context of the short story or short novel, focuses on the analysis of the pain of women, that becomes more evident as their awareness of their social insignificance grows (“The Women Men Don’t See”, 1973); the pain of submissive animals and those who develop empathy towards them (“The Psychologist Who Wouldn’t Do Awful Things to Rats”, 1976); the pain of the entire human race in the absence of meaning, which extends to a suffering that reach out to other worlds, other (alien) creatures, the entire universe (“A Momentary Taste of Being”, 1975). And, furthermore, the deadly ambivalence of love and sexuality (*Love is the Plan, the Plan is Death*, 1973), motherhood that leads to death (“The Color of Neanderthal Eyes”, 1988), the genocide of the feminine (“The Screwfly Solution”, 1977), up to the war on women, even more ferocious against poor and black women (“Morality Meat”, 1985).

Reforming Genre and Gender from Within: Alice Sheldon/James Tiptree, Jr.'s Short Stories (1973-1981)

Federica di Nicola

DOI: 10.26379/1898

Abstract

This article analyzes a selection of Alice Sheldon's SF short stories which she wrote under the pseudonym of James Tiptree, Jr. and which revolve around gender equality and women's sociocultural role. Sheldon stood out within the SF literary context of her time thanks to the original handling of traditional SF tropes as tools used to account for the female experience and to effectively investigate human nature.

Through the close reading of the stories, this article highlights Alice Sheldon's innovativeness and tackles some of her most recurrent and feminist-coded thematic nuclei. It argues for the importance of Sheldon's SF and for its influence and relevance within an entire literary genre, whose potentiality she harnessed to make space for female presence and action.

The Unravelling Narratives of James Tiptree, Jr.

Farah Mendlesohn

DOI: 10.26379/1899

Abstract

James Tiptree Jr. was a short story writer whose stories were witty, unexpected and painful. Spread over 20 years there is a distinct development in those stories from the witty screwball style of *Birth of a Salesman* (1968) through the race side sport story *Faithful to the Terra in Our Fashion* (1969) and on to bitter stories such as “*And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill’s Side*”. This essay will consider the different narrative structures Tiptree Jr. used and consider them as commentaries and reworkings of earlier classic science fiction.

Senza via d'uscita: guerra e tossicodipendenza in “Yanqui Doodle” di Alice Sheldon, alias James Tiptree, Jr.

Umberto Rossi

DOI: 10.26379/1900

Abstract

Compared to other short stories written by Alice Sheldon/James Tiptree, Jr., “Yanqui Doodle” has not received so far much critical attention. And yet this is a remarkable example of science-fictional war narrative, dealing with such important issues as trauma, the depiction of atrocities, neo-colonial politics, the American Empire; moreover, there is a gendered subtext, based on what might be defined as the femalization of a male subject, which connects this story with Sheldon’s/ Tiptree’s more celebrated narratives. All in all the story of a drug-addicted American infantryman subjected to a brutal and almost sadistic detox program can be well read as a bitter and pessimistic commentary on the policies of the Reagan administration in the 1980s, thus articulating a sort of critical allegory of American imperialism which is still valid today.

I percorsi dell'estinzione. Tiptree e la fine del mondo

Nicoletta Vallorani

DOI: 10.26379/1901

Abstract

The topic of extinction recurs in contemporary fcs, both by women and by men, and yet it also appears frequently in many narratives that belong to the classic tradition of the genre, starting with Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, 1826. Tiptree also deals with it, choosing an angle that anticipates many of the contemporary inflections of the theme. The most relevant aspect lies in the writer's ability to exploit her experience in the field of experimental psychology, but problematizing it, in the narrative discourse, in an unprecedented way and calling into question aspects more related to the variability of the socializing processes of human communities. In this way, Tiptree anticipates theoretical speculations that are very close to the more recent reflections of Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, Federica Timeto and others, triggering a fertile exploration that goes on today.

The Science Fiction & Fantasy Research Collection at Texas A&M University: Preserving the Future Deep in the Heart of Texas

Jeremy W. Brett

DOI: 10.26379/1903

Abstract

Texas and Texans are renowned (notoriously so, sometimes) for an obsession with **bigness**, usually but not exclusively our own. In genres so often set within the vast distances between stars and the epic sweep of fantasy wonderlands, with stories involving massive starships or enormous monsters, it fits our state mentality well to tie ourselves to the history and ongoing evolution of the science fiction and fantasy genres. Certainly, Texas has more than its fair share of speculative fiction luminaries (both those born here and those who have at one time or another made the state their home), including people like Michael Moorcock, Elizabeth Moon, Howard Waldrop, Bruce Sterling, Martha Wells, Rebecca Roanhorse, Joe R. Lansdale, Gene Wolfe, Ardath Mayhar, and so many others.....

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Dystopias: The Literary Imagination edited by Oriana Palusci and Héliane Ventura



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Introduction

Dystopia, Ambiguous utopia, Ustopia

Oriana Palusci and Heliane Ventura

DOI: 10.26379/2006

Abstract

The ideal city [the favourite site of utopian literature] turned out to be only one step in a not yet imagined story. [...] In the second half of the nineteenth there were many signs of crisis and people started to think that utopia was certainly feasible but that, in reality, the utopian paradise hid hell.

Thus Raymond Trousson (2000: 183) defines the shift from utopian to dystopia (or dystopian) Western imagination. The very different, but in both cases shining, futures of William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) and William Bellamy's *Looking Backwards* (1888) fade away and the gloomy outlines of a hell-on-earth landscape take shape among the thick fogs enveloping both individual lives and the whole social body: the triumph of capitalism, the rise of totalitarian regimes, the improvement of sentient machines and artificial intelligence lead humanity towards utter submission or physical annihilation. "*The Last Man in Europe*" is one of the titles considered by George Orwell for his great dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, centered on the sterile rebellion of its main character.....

La lunga notte della svastica. Katharine Burdekin e il nazismo

Domenico Gallo

DOI: 10.26379/1996

Abstract

Swastika Night (1937) by Katharine Burdekin (1896-1969) captures and narratively elaborates the complex anthropological relationship that constitutes the substratum on which the experience of European fascism was based. The role of women, homosexuality, motherhood, but also public health, the public and private sides of sex, the perception and exposure of the body, as well as certain aspects of racism in terms of biology, have been studied by numerous contemporary historians (such as Conte and Essner, 1995), but Burdekin's narrative version establishes a political and anthropological elaboration through literature exceptionally ahead of its time. *Swastika Night*, together with *Proud Man* (1934) and *The End of This Day's Business* (1989), are elements of a discourse not only feminist but more generally of gender studies that includes, even before Ursula Le Guin's *The Left End of Darkness*, the hypothesis that a person is capable of changing sex and the study, within the events of the novel, of the coming together of new identities. Reading Burdekin's novels makes it possible to hypothesize that science fiction is invented (and this is the case with some female writers who, although writing masterpieces, were not profound connoisseurs of the genre) when the yardstick of realism is no longer sufficient to describe certain situations with the necessary radicalism.

Cosmetic Surgery and Mythic Images in the Dystopian World of *Babel-17*

Jack Love

DOI: 10.26379/1997

Abstract

In Samuel R. Delany's *Babel-17*, Transport employees like pilots and navigators are often depicted as cosmetically altered humans. Cosmetisurgery (as it is called in the novel) of these characters is purely volitional and, as such, an expression of their individuality. I argue that the cosmetic alteration of human bodies into mythic images functions much like T.S. Eliot's "mythic method." In *Babel-17*, the most vulnerable human beings (Transport employees) find meaning and stability through their cosmetic modifications. Transport humans must literally connect their bodies to starships as pilots, navigators, and other positions in space. Living as appendages to larger machines is a dystopian nightmare that is both dangerous and dehumanizing. Through cosmetic alteration and the use of mythic images, Transport humans write stability onto their bodies. Though cosmetic alteration does not free Transport humans from the strictures of an intergalactic dystopia, it does provide them with stability, control, and individuality.

Oscillazioni tra materno umano e inumano in *The Handmaid's Tale* di Margaret Atwood

Greta Francesconi

/ DOI: 10.26379/1998

Abstract

Handmaids in *The Handmaid's Tale* are subhuman creatures, versions of the “simulacrum”, deprived of any kind of identity. They are mothers: the matrix conquered by a totalitarianism that has their body in order to dominate reproduction. This utopia presents an open-ended finale that extends the story up to the transmedial TV adaptation. Disclosing an escalation of liminal violence, the storytelling is inserted between the abjection and the holiness of a typical monstrous maternal. This analysis connects the mother-Handmaid to the cyborg: in feminist cyberpunk, a partial, assembled and denatured identity that will attempt to make a new overcoming utopia. How can a scientific and technological reworked version of identity release the feminine from mistreatment and exploitation? Dissolving binary ideologies like those between man and women, human and animal, organic and inorganic, that are all regulated by dystopian fluctuations between human and inhuman.

“Roses in the garden of that unseen world”: Nature and the “Dry Witch” in Margaret Atwood’s MaddAddam Trilogy

Elena Bastianoni

DOI: 10.26379/1999

Abstract

Starting from Pierre Hadot’s representation of the history of the idea of nature, this paper intends to explore the bond between femininity and nature in Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam Trilogy*, where character Toby can be seen as a reconfiguration of Graves’s “White Goddess”. As a posthumanist Hecate, “Dry Witch” Toby possesses a vast knowledge of nature’s secrets, including beekeeping and mycology. Toby’s nickname underlines the theme of witchcraft, a key topic in Atwood’s writing. The representation of the bees as intermediaries between the tangible and the unseen, with Toby as their listener, underlines the bond between femininity and nature and explores the metaphoric relationship between mycology and a way of promoting a more inclusive society for the non-human world. By presenting Toby as the guide of a society based on hybridization, Atwood promotes the renegotiation of the bond between humanity and nature as a chance of preserving life on the planet.

“Everything matters, Junior. Why don’t you get that?”: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Ron Currie, Jr.’s *Everything Matters!*

MaKenzie Hope Munson and Kevin Andrew Spicer

DOI: 10.26379/2000

Abstract

In Ron Currie, Jr.’s 2007 novel, *Everything Matters!*, the opening chapter describes a strange “voice” that addresses and informs a child in the womb, Junior, that an asteroid will incinerate the world in thirty-six years. The novel presents a perhaps somewhat contrived trope while simultaneously providing readers with opportunities to think through numerous relations between the apocalyptic, the dystopian, and the potentially catastrophic effects of this “certain knowledge.” We think that a perspective deeply influenced and informed by psychoanalytic thinking is very much called for. Lacan’s work will allow us to marshal a large number of details in the novel that we would like to account for; furthermore, the quite psychoanalytic opening chapter of the novel will allow us to talk about the emergence of the subject into a world that is constantly cut through with lack, finitude, and all of those incessant questions about the nature of meaning and whether or not anything “really matters.”

Speculative Reversals: Conflating (Parodied) Utopia and (Focalized) Dystopia in Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots*

Anna Pasolini
DOI: 10.26379/2001

Abstract

This paper sets out to analyse *Blonde Roots* (2009) by Bernardine Evaristo focusing on its textuality and narrative strategies in order to investigate the ways in which the novel's many inversions and subversions trigger a reflection on literary genre interlinked with political issues of gender, race and class. The novel retells an inverted version of the history of the transatlantic slave trade within a redesigned world geography which reflects human power distribution. It is both a "what if" and a "this is what was" story, a work of speculative fiction which problematizes clear-cut distinctions between utopia and dystopia showing that such a contrast depends on perspective and point of view. *Blonde Roots*' provocative reversals blend generic features, problematise traditional labels and bend established narrative conventions to foreground the (constructive and deconstructive) power of storytelling, which emerges quite forcefully also thanks to an intertextual web of strategic references to the Western literary canon. Investigating these references leads one back to scrutinising generic categories, as intertextual allusions at once question (parodically) and reinforce (ideologically) the dystopian framework of the novel and the discursive articulation of gendered and racialised bodies and identities it substantiates.

Mondo senza internet. Paura e inquietudine nei romanzi distopici di Giovanni Agnoloni

Dorota Karwacka-Pastor

DOI: 10.26379/2002

Abstract

In his literary production on dystopia – collected in the cycle *Internet: Cronache della fine* (2021) – Italian writer Giovanni Agnoloni, a member of the Connectivist literary movement, imagines the world of tomorrow suddenly deprived of Internet.

Among the incessant catastrophes that torment today's humanity, such a dramatic change could hypothetically occur, triggering a radical transformation in the reality that we know. However, the author believes that identifying the problem and describing this turning point is not sufficient. He rather concentrates on human beings and their desires, hopes and fears. Mankind, terrified by the European blackout resulting in the disconnection from the Net, would sink into chaos and solitude. Still, it would have an opportunity to reconnect with its most genuine self and with the others, without hiding behind a computer anymore. Agnoloni's focus is on the empathic concern for everybody's future. His moral imperative is to warn us against what is maybe inevitable.

Dystopia of Anxiety and Hope in Nayantara Sahgal's *When the Moon Shines by Day*

Shwetha Elsa Louis and Sayan Chattopadhyay

DOI: 10.26379/2003

Abstract

The article argues that the anxieties which drive the dystopian imagination in Nayantara Sahgal's novella *When the Moon Shines by Day* (2017) coincide with the contemporary displacement of dominant national ideals which emerged during the years of India's struggle for independence and its post-independent years by a new grand narrative of purity. It analyses dystopia's origins in connection with the postcolonial nation and the nation's relationship with its minorities. This problematizes the dystopian anxieties of the text which are unmistakably middle class in nature and prompts the question – who gets to label something as dystopian?

In the second section, the article finds that Sahgal's novella is an example of postcolonial dystopia, while simultaneously exemplifying critical dystopia. In doing so, it argues against Mrinalini Chakravorty's claims regarding postcolonial dystopia's rejection of utopian impulses and its subsequent stalling of the discourse on critical dystopias.