

science, “unintuitive” in both its methods and its outcomes. Science tells us much about the very small, the very distant (and thus the very vast universe), and the very ancient. It locates us in the immensity of space and the incomprehensible depth of time. In doing so, it reveals endless wonders. Unfortunately, however, these wonders are seldom on a human scale. While the world revealed by science is, in many ways, more amazing than anything previously imagined by mythmakers, prophets, or storytellers, it is also far less intuitively meaningful or understandable. Worse, there is *so much* that we do not truly comprehend.

Here, then, are some questions to ask, fifty years after C.P. Snow began the two cultures debate. Can the scientific picture be made meaningful to ordinary people who live, work, love, and die in the middle-sized human world? What happens when scientific explanations defy our comprehension? It is one thing to be told—by Camus, say—that the universe does not suffer or yearn, that it is indifferent to us and alien to our emotions. Perhaps that is bad enough. But it is another to suspect that we cannot understand its ultimate workings at all. As is often said, there is a sense in which even quantum physicists do not truly understand quantum theory. What does science fiction have to say about all this? How does it illuminate the issues?

We know that science fiction has often filled the imaginary future, and sometimes an imaginary past or an alternative present, with exotic locations for tales of adventure and heroism. It has, however, also had much to say about the process of radical and irreversible social change brought about by new technologies. But how successful has it been in coming to terms with fundamental advances in human knowledge, and with science’s increasing strangeness and mystery? I would like to understand—or at least see some well-argued opinions—whether science fiction, or a sub-component of it, has been successful in making the emerging scientific picture of the world more accessible and comprehensible. Have stories with some fidelity to genuine science helped to build a bridge for their readers, or is that asking too much?

While the articles collected in *Science Fiction and the Two Cultures* are individually valuable, they seldom address questions such as these—at any rate, not explicitly or in adequate depth. That is not to deny the editors’ real achievement or the insights offered by the various authors. There is room, however, for more systematic efforts at understanding what the “two cultures” concept means today, relating this to science fiction and its distinctive contribution to culture as a whole.—**Russell Blackford, Monash University**

**Diegetics of Mainstream Hollywood.** James Walters. *Alternative Worlds in Hollywood Cinema*. Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2008. 232 pp. £14.95 pbk.

Concentrating on both classical and contemporary Hollywood cinema, this rigorous study analyzes the role of diegetic narratives-within-narratives in select films, foregrounding scrupulous close readings over summary and interpretive gloss. The title of the book led me to believe that the films under scrutiny would fall squarely into the sf genre à la Paul Verhoeven’s *Total Recall* (1990), David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome* (1983), or the Wachowski Brothers’ *MATRIX* trilogy (1999-2003). Most of them, however, are not thoroughbred sf, if they are sf at all.

Walters's thesis is premised on the notion that Hollywood films have historically pitted various "worlds" against one another, worlds that take the form of dreams and alternate zones of existence. "I am concerned with the ways in which alternative worlds impact upon characters that experience them," he writes, "engaging with an investment in questions of individual self-awareness and fluctuating self-identity that all the films share. At its most basic level, therefore, this is a study of films that explore what happens to people when they move between worlds" (13). Such movements consistently revise desire and perception in the diegeses of Hollywood cinema as well as in the real world, implicated by representation and extrapolation. *Alternative Worlds* is an impressive examination of this dynamic.

Walters devises three categories for filmic worlds: Imagined Worlds (dreams or hallucinations), Potential Worlds (alternate realities analogous to characters' primary realities), and Other Worlds (distant, unfamiliar regions and societies). Respectively, these comprise the book's three parts and follow the first chapter, "Establishing Contexts." As the title suggests, here Walters discusses works and critics that inform his argument, especially Stanley Cavell, whose ideas on Hollywood worlds form the basis of *Alternative Worlds*. Walters explains that his work aspires to develop and refine those ideas: "A central aim of this book ... is to attempt a more precise categorization of alternative worlds in Hollywood films that leaves us better placed to understand the contrasts and correlations that the films discussed wish to establish" (10). This chapter is by no means limited to Cavell, however; it cites and evaluates a wide array of world-theories on film.

Each of the three parts contains three chapters; in all cases, the first chapter erects scaffolding for the close readings that are performed in the subsequent two. The primary texts in "Part One: Imagined Worlds" are Victor Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), Fritz Lang's *The Woman in the Window* (1944), and Michael Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004). In "Part Two: Potential Worlds," they are Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) and Harold Ramis's *Groundhog Day* (1993); and in "Part Three: Other Worlds," they are Vincent Minnelli's *Brigadoon* (1954) and Gary Ross's *Pleasantville* (1998). Analyses are extensive and meticulous, and pay attention as much to content as to form. They are also supplemented by shorter commentaries on many other films. Among the clearly identifiable sf films are *Back to the Future* (1985), *eXistenz* (1999), *The Matrix* (1999), and *Vanilla Sky* (2001), but Walters's remarks on them are peripheral at best, and he is not concerned with the role of what I call "worldplay" within the framework of sf. Overall, this inattentiveness is justified; Walters is not an sf critic or theorist and does not purport to be. At the same time, given the longstanding seminal trope of worldplay in the sf genre, *Alternative Worlds* could be enhanced by a greater attentiveness not only to explicit sf themes but also to how Hollywood cinema has represented the increasing science-fictionalization of the real.

This, perhaps, is mere wishful thinking on the part of an sf-monger. While his prose is sometimes a little dry, Walters has written a valuable book that traverses a broad temporal span in cinematic history. Ultimately he offers a unique perspective on the relationships between fantasy and reality as promulgated by

some of Hollywood's most popular films. Ardent movie buffs may like *Alternative Worlds*, but primarily it will appeal to film studies scholars.—**D. Harlan Wilson, Wright State University-Lake Campus**

**Scholarly Intersections.** Kathryn J. Weese. *Feminist Narrative and the Supernatural: The Function of Fantastic Devices in Seven Recent Novels*. CRITICAL EXPLORATIONS IN SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY 11. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008. xii +222 pp. \$35 pbk.

The intersections, or the perceived lack of such connections, between scholarship on the fantastic as a genre, often with a primary focus on canonical male writers, and feminist scholarship, which has at times disdained the popular genres of science fiction and fantasy, are a rich locus for work. Kathryn Weese's project is a strong attempt at mapping those intersections and applying the generated critical insights to texts within the academic context of competing postmodernisms. The project is a fascinating one, and Weese provides a number of compelling readings of her chosen novels; but her argument is difficult to follow because of overused discursive endnotes.

Weese situates her project at what she identifies as the intersection between two different schools of thought. On one side is scholarship on the fantastic, primarily structuralist in methodology, rooted in Tzvetan Todorov's 1975 study *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. On the other lies scholarship on feminist narratology that contextualizes formal analysis in the ideological and socio-historical discussions of women's lives in a patriarchal culture, including work by Margaret Homans, Molly Hite, Gayle Green, Rachel Blau Du Plessis, and Sally Robinson. A final context for this monograph is the ongoing academic literary debates about postmodernisms, including magical realism's contested placement. Academic work on postmodernisms, including but not limited to magical realism, often ignores science fiction and fantasy, as well as the fantastic, even in texts that otherwise meet the criteria for postmodern writing.

Drawing together these different strands of theoretical work is an ambitious and possibly overly complex project, but Weese makes a convincing case for her argument that recent movements to identify some postmodern literature as "fantastic" operate by excluding contemporary women authors from consideration. Her selection of novels by women that exist in the borderlands of "the fantastic," "women's literature," and "magical realism" requires the use of such a range of critical discourses.

The academic context in which Weese works consists of a culture that has excluded or marginalized some genres and classes of authors. In recent years, what might function as a more inclusive field (a fluid "postmodernism" as opposed to an artificially restricted "modernism") has tended to foreground and valorize a single type of postmodern fiction. This new canon includes primarily metafiction by white men (Weese identifies John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and Thomas Pynchon) and focuses on a privileged exploration of language experimentation and the stance that "the only reality is that there is no reality" (22). The complexity of Weese's theoretical and critical context is complicated