Review: √−1, Other

Reviewed Work(s): Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism: Beyond the Golden Rule by Elana Gomel

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global capital, most focus primarily on texts from the Global North. Alas, this may be a digression on my part, but only because the collection does a good job of inciting such questions and in this way fulfills the editors’ note that they “[do] not claim to offer a universal kind of revelation” and “hope instead that the richness of this volume might encourage readers to keep interrogating ‘the end’ and pursue further unveilings of their own” (11). This compelling collection will provide many starting points for thinking further about the significance of apocalyptic narratives in contemporary sf and would be a useful addition to any library.—Malisa Kurtz, Brock University


To read Elana Gomel’s fascinating book Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism: Beyond the Golden Rule is to find oneself lost—enjoyably, mind-alteringly, other-sentiently—in a Borgesian meditation labyrinth designed precisely to lose the reader’s “self” by misplacing the reader in the self’s absence. The result: approximately 200 pages of continuous intellectual suspense. Enigmas proliferate. What is the other’s self? What is the other’s other? Insofar as the other’s other turns out to be one’s own self, then which one of us is the actual Other? To the extent that we live in a posthuman era, have “human rights” become obsolete? Is empathy a misguided form of anthropomorphism? Is it possible to empathize with an entity incapable of empathizing back? These are the kinds of questions that Elana Gomel explores with insight and wit through three “Parts” (“Confrontation,” “Assimilation,” “Transformation”) consisting of vibrant sections framed by titles that are often instructively wacky: “Us Are Them” (9), “Ethics of Metamorphosis” (27), “The Monster Next Door” (100), “Identity on Ice” (101), “Utopian Frogs” (134), “A Loquacious Broccoli” (165), “The Zombie in the Mirror” (176). Alive with what might be called xenopathy (other-feeling) and metapathy (beyond-feeling), the pages of Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism ultimately guide the reader to a space where one discovers a reflective surface. What one finds in the depths of the reflective surface is not the grammatical subject (or even object) that one might expect, but rather a series of science-fictional pronouns.

What do I mean by a “science-fictional pronoun”? Science-fictional pronouns can assume various shapes under various circumstances. The first-person singular “I,” for instance, takes on a science-fictional charge (thereby becoming, in effect, a science-fictional pronoun) whenever it is placed immediately before a comma, a space, and the noun for something to which subjectivity is not ordinarily ascribed: “I, Robot,” “I, Vampire,” and so on. By contrast, the absence of pronouns such as “I” in the science-fictional language that Samuel R. Delany conjures in his novel Babel-17 (1966) virtually amounts to a science-fictional pronoun in itself. The plural first-person narration in (among other texts) William Faulkner’s short story “A Rose for Emily” (1930) and Ed Park’s novel Personal Days (2008)—the subtle
use of “we”/“ours”/“us”—elicits an eerie sense of other-humanly consciousness, consciousness distributed elusively across individual identities, consciousness disembodied (or perhaps meta-bodied), consciousness difficult to locate in space or in time. Meanwhile, in Yevgeny Zamyatin’s novel We (1924), the central pronoun is not the first-person plural (as the title might suggest) but the square root of minus one—the imaginary number “i” that erupts from within D-503 (the narrator and protagonist of We) in a narrative voice identifiable as the square root of the negative first-person singular (or the √-1st-person singular). Hence the novel has an invisible and “unreal” subtitle: not “I, Robot,” but “i, D-503,” which is to say: “√i, D-503.”

Although Elana Gomel does not present her argument in exactly these terms, Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism is a book mindful of and preoccupied with science-fictional pronouns and pronouns more generally. “Torn between attraction and revulsion, we are watching the skies,” Gomel writes in “Invasions of Discourse Snatchers” (the opening of “Introduction: Why Do We need Aliens?”) before immediately interrogating her own use of the first-person plural: “‘We,’ perhaps, is the wrong pronoun to use here since it assumes the uniformity of audience and response” (1). The readership she has in mind, Gomel goes on to explain, consists of those of “us” who follow literary science fiction. Refreshingly, and mind-openingly, Gomel has “made a conscious choice” to analyze “less-known writers and texts,” among them Michael Bishop’s Transfigurations (1979), Sheri S. Tepper’s Grass (1989), Nancy Kress’s Steal Across the Sky (2009), Paul Park’s Celestis (1993), Housuke Nojiri’s Usurper of the Sun (2002), Stanislaw Lem’s Solaris (1961), and Amy Thomson’s The Color of Distance (1995). As for the book’s purpose, Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism “focuses on literary SF as a testing-ground for the ontological, epistemological, and especially ethical issues raised by the possibility of the existence of alien intelligence—entities that defy our cultural and psychological conflation of reason and humanity” (2). The “testing-ground,” however, is more than merely experimental: “While aliens may, or may not, exist,” Gomel writes, “the nonhuman is already here, inhabiting and undermining our most cherished verities of humanism. We need aliens because we are already alien to ourselves” (4). In other words, “we” and “we” (let alone “we” and “I” or “you”) are not identical. “We” does not equal “we.”

Through close readings that are engaging and rich in detail, Gomel probes the ethical implications of the above-mentioned non-equation. In particular, she investigates works of literary science fiction that defy the symmetrical ethics of reciprocity and challenge the “Golden Rule” referred to in the book’s subtitle. She draws attention, for example, to a giant “brotherhood in arms” in Adam Roberts’s novel New Modern Army (2010) that chants: “I, I, I, I, I, I, I am most myself when I am fighting” (qtd. 68). What kind of pronoun is claiming here to be most itself (himself? themselves?) when fighting? Does “I” count as human? If so (or even if not!), can he/it/they be held accountable for war crimes? Or (Gomel wonders) does the first-person singular “remain
locked in the hall of mirrors where the ‘I’ fights its own shadows?” (68). Moreover, when the first-person singular is preceded by the word “the” (as it is in Gomel’s query above), does “I” not then transform into a third-person “it”? What if the grammatical third person is in fact another pronoun for the grammatical first person? What if consciousness—of other selves, of one’s own self—is unavailable for any kind of narrative experience? This last speculation is one that Gomel addresses with special astuteness. “The plot of alien infestation inscribes an intratextual transformation of a human being into an alien,” she writes:

Thus, it poses significant theoretical questions about the narrative representation of subjectivity. Narrative voice and focalization are the standard tools of such representation. Can these tools cope with an alien subjectivity located in a human body; that is, lacking the external, corporeal signs by which nonhumans are ordinarily marked in SF? And if they fail, what does this failure tell us about the limits of psychological realism and its underlying assumptions about human ontology? (95)

As Gomel argues persuasively, the brilliance of science fiction resides in its power to reveal “the basic disparity between the narrative techniques used to represent the human subject and the thematic concern with the posthuman…. Novels of alien infestation are textual sites where the narrative techniques of humanism splinter under the thematic impact of dealing with the ontological Other” (100). This may be the most striking lesson that Gomel’s provocative book has taught me: alien figures expose the rift between conventional narrative techniques and posthuman issues. Perhaps along similar lines, science-fictional pronouns expose the rift between conventional grammar and a posthuman ethical system—a system capable of comfortably answering questions such as “What if the Other is a moral agent but with a morality different from mine? What if compassion backfires when my own intuitions provide no clues to the desires and needs of my interlocutor? How do we navigate in a world where forms of agency are as multiform as the biological configurations of posthuman bodies?” (5). While such questions are not theoretical—cybernetic organisms, for example, already exist, and there have always been fundamental limits to the self’s ability to identify with the other—“posthumanism” remains more “theory” than “practice.” What will it take for posthumanism to become an applied way of life? Will it take a new science-fictional grammar? An alien invasion? Both?—Seo-Young Chu, Queens College


As critical work on science fiction becomes more mainstream across multiple disciplines, we see more and more scholarship that does not take the disciplinary assumptions and well-worn thematic concerns of “science fiction studies” as its starting point. As a development this is, paradoxically, both