

Science Fiction Devices

David Burrows and Simon O’Sullivan

Introduction: A Discussion with an Academic

We say, “There is no such thing as academic writing.”

The academic (also us) draws a breath and responds by pointing to the volumes of critical writing on our bookshelves separated from our other books (which the academic silently observes are mostly Science Fiction). We concede Arts and Humanities academics have one Unique Selling Proposition: critique. (Not a problem, critique is necessary, it is needed.) Still, we say there is no such thing as academic writing, though without doubt there are academic communities. When the academic asks how is anyone able to identify our community if there is no such thing as academic writing we say, look out for three kinds of performances: 1. a conducting of communication between the living and the dead; 2. an illuminating (an invoking) of some problem, concept, or object; 3. a critique of another academic’s writing. Through these performances a bond is tied between small groups that make up the friends of critique, for we are relatively speaking, a community few in number: whether in one building, city or nation, or dispersed globally and connected by the internet, we may as well be on an island.

And in fact, we think this island is well known and has a name (we have written about this before); our community has at least one foot on Immanuel Kant’s “Island of Truth” (whatever post- or anti-Kantian protestations we make) (see Burrows and O’Sullivan 2019: 103–24). This is a place Kant also describes as a “land of truth” surrounded by a “broad and stormy ocean, the true seat of illusion”; the latter, according to the philosopher, portending adventures which can never be concluded or escaped from (Kant 1998: 337–8). Despite Kant’s warning, we suggest it is this “Island of Truth,” the ground drawn by *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1998), that is hard to escape from. Here, we are not declaring we feel bound by Kant’s correlationist notions; rather, we are specifically concerned with Kant’s “Island” as a fictional device that shelters academic communities on the robust terrain of critique, at a distance from others lost in a fog of dubious metaphysics. The academic seems affronted and we explain that we do not question whether epistemic traditions have value; rather our question is whether some of the “Island’s” customs ensure, despite our best efforts, that our community lives high above and far from objects of critique. We do not want to live like this, like isolated

lighthouse keepers, sending signals—illuminations—in vain hope of making visible the illusions of the surrounding seas. It is true that today, more diverse communities with different customs are encouraged to take up residence in the “Island’s” lighthouses but this does not change our view; the “Island of Truth” surrounded by the “Ocean of Illusion” is a fictional device similar to Plato’s story about the “Light of the Sun” and a “Cave” (the latter a subterranean level below Kant’s “Island”?), both affirming that truth is glimpsed from firm or high ground, unsullied by fogbanks or shadows and offering clear sightlines and illumination.

The academic speaks: “That sounds harsh, do you want to leave the ‘Island’?” We are not sure that is desirable or possible—we know we are privileged (identifiable as white and male), lucky to earn our living on the “Island” and we would not fare well if we left. We only wonder if there are other devices and perspectives that we might explore, different from those afforded by the “Island of Truth.” In fact, we have written (Burrows and O’Sullivan 2019: 199–216) about one such device before, Samuel Delany’s “Mirrorshades,” which he equates with Science Fiction novels in which

the text becomes someplace where you look to see what’s going on, only what you see is yourself looking at the text to see what’s going on—while at the same time, the text presents a gaze that is somehow darkened, distorted, and reflected.

Delany 1994: 172

We do not have to underline how writing as “Mirrorshades” may be different from the fictional device of the “Island of Truth.” The academic gets this, saying, “Is that not Todd A. Comer’s insight, that Delany’s writing presents something like Donna Haraway’s notion of an embodied, situated knowledge that counters ‘disembodied panoptical objectivity’ (Comer 2005: 178–9)? I know this problematizing of academic objectivity as the maintenance of an all-seeing, incorporeal, critically-distanced viewpoint is old news,” the academic adds, “but it is still important. I think Comer quotes Haraway’s axiom ‘only partial perspective promises objective vision’ (Haraway quoted in Comer 2005: 179). Is that what you are getting at?”

We appreciate this question and our answer is yes and no. Writing as “Mirrorshades” gazes far beyond situated knowledge (for the latter might provide yet more firm terrain for critique). When pushed further we explain that Delany’s “Mirrorshades” double and multiply perspectives by engendering different focus points, refractions, and reflections. We are sure the academic thinks this is hackneyed and facile but we are too excited to care; for we think exploring Science Fiction novels to learn about their devices may transform our own writing habits (which always, still, nod towards epistemic values). In this we recognize ontological questions are called for in which a device of sorts is at stake; one that tests the perspectives of the writer and reader.

The academic raises an objection: “This all sounds familiar . . . anthropological . . . philosophical . . . academic even.” We nod; this is a perceptive observation. In making our proposal for concerning the importance of Science Fiction devices we do indeed draw upon anthropology, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s *perspectivism* (2014) to be specific. We admit we appropriate and repurpose this concept that draws on Amerindian metaphysics and develops an anthropology focused on ontological differences in which

anything considered alive is conceived of as having personhood and a perspective; a metaphysics different to a European approach that divides animal from human, and nature from culture. Viveiros argues that Amerindians see themselves as one nature or perspective among many, for which there is only one culture—multivocality. We understand Viveiros's perspectivism as placing asymmetrical differences or perspectives in dialogue, through a transversal diagramming which Viveiros claims as transforming (subverting and deforming) concepts (Viveiros 2014: 87). What we suspect is that there is a kind of perspectivism at work in some Science Fiction writing about societies or encounters between different life forms or entities from different points in space-time—an intuition that follows Raymond Williams' thinking that some Science Fiction is "Space Anthropology" (2010: 15). We also acknowledge that our proposal has some affinity with Françios Laruelle's Non-Philosophy, which is different from Viveiros' transversal explorations in that Laruelle attempts to flatten the authority of philosophy—a levelling of a hierarchy—which ensures philosophy speaks to the sciences, art and other practices and not the other way round (Laruelle et al. 2013: 98–100). It is through this flattening process that philo-fictions are produced in which the tools of philosophy are put to use for non-philosophical ends, something we think Science Fiction can be said to do too. Philo-Science-Fiction and Science Fiction perspectivism, that is what we want to explore, and that is where we are going start our exploration. We point to our Science Fiction novels as we say this, and then glance at the academic who appears stoic now and says, "Why not? Plenty of Science Fiction novels have been the subject of critique; they litter your 'Island' and your own writing. Your first port of call looks to be *Roadside Picnic* by the Strugatsky Brothers (2014), I love this tale about Red and his visits to a zone where epistemic values falter, I wish you luck."

Here we feel wrong-footed. Red is a "Stalker" who illegally searches for artefacts in a zone transformed by an alien visitation. Intuitively we reject the Stalker and his alien artefacts as Science Fiction devices; at least, they are not what we are looking for. But Red has been listening and offers to guide us on a tour that offers "alternative" views of our "Island of Truth" (said with irony). We take up Red's offer and, bidding farewell to the academic, we set off towards a city in the distance, the beam from our lighthouse on the "Island of Truth" illuminating our passage, but only so far.

Dhalgren by Samuel Delany

Sooner than expected, we arrived in Bellona where Samuel Delany's *Dhalgren*—a tale about a one-sandaled amnesiac called the Kid—unfolds. We do not bother trying to work out where we are exactly. Bellona, as William Gibson states, is a city invisible to most; it has no particular location and accommodates a population who have neither homes nor work (Gibson 2010: 804). It is in this broken landscape, in which the Sun has been seen to set where it rises, that the Kid finds community as a member of the Scorpions gang and tenderness in a three-way erotic relationship with a woman and a teenage boy.

We fear the Scorpions and tread cautiously through streets without firm laws (natural or civic) and that, like the Kid, are in bad shape. The Kid does not lament his

damaged state, for early in the novel he states that a mind is invisible until something goes wrong with it, then an awareness of the edges of the mind can be felt, “the same way you become aware of your eye when you get a cinder in it. Because it *hurts* . . .” (Delany 2001: 48). Attempting to make sense of *Dhalgren* can similarly generate an experience, albeit less painful, of feeling the edges of thought. The novel *Dhalgren* itself plays a part in this, as the novel seems to appear in the Kid’s hands as a notebook given to him in the first chapter of the book. As the Kid writes in the notebook he finds every other page is already inscribed with thoughts that could be the Kid’s own. Are there then at least two versions of *Dhalgren*, the first being the book in the reader’s hands and the second being the Kid’s notebook, through which the reader registers a distorted gaze (the Kid’s gaze as the reader’s own)? In this way the novel is a device that sutures the edges of fiction and reality.

When we finally find the Kid sitting outside a ruined house, we cannot take our eyes off a chain linking lenses, prisms, and mirrors that he is wearing. These objects are common to most lighthouses and our “Island” but it strikes us that the Kid’s body looped by this optical chain must serve as an (archaic or perhaps scientific?) apparatus of some kind. Red tells us we are wasting time on useless trinkets that, at best, have a symbolic function; the notebook is the prize. But we do not think we are just chasing metaphors; the potential of Delaney’s chain of optical instruments reinforces a hunch developed from reading the author’s description of “Mirrorshades”: Science Fiction devices have diagrammatic and perspectival functions.

Lenses, prisms, and mirrors mediate information—light—which always arrives from some other space-time. A mirror reflects light from the position of the one who looks straight-on at the glass. Does this subject see themselves in the mirror or, through imaginative reversal, does the glass provide sight of (or a site or stage for) how others might see them? Of course, a mirror can be positioned to look at surrounding spaces but it is important that the viewer’s body, even if absent in the glass, is present. In front of a mirror the viewer’s body is inferred through the possibility of being caught in the mirror’s reflection. In contrast, a lens turned upon the cosmos can register blueshifting and redshifting futures and pasts by collapsing distance and revealing unseen details. In this, a lens enforces the hierarchy of a single perspective point as mediator of other points in space (other perspectives); but through imaginative reversal, a subject’s point of view can be marked as a horizon point for other, future or past, perspective points. That is, past or future can become focused in the present in the same way a lens can focus the Sun’s rays to scorch or burn. A prism is different again, it refracts light to reveal a multiplicity of colours in a light beam previously viewed as mono-coloured or transparent. When looked through, the prism’s facets present multiple perspectives of anything viewed through this crystal lens. In this, a prism bends and distorts as it refracts and multiplies viewpoints. This can have a disorientating effect, particularly when approached again through imaginative reversal, in which colours and viewpoints are thought of as combining in the prism. Then it becomes hard to shake the idea that what is seen through a prism is reality as a multiplicity of perspectives.

Again Red dismisses the chain of optics as a useless decoration. Maybe he is right. We know the Kid has no idea why he wears the optical chain; however, the character

Newboy, reading from the Kid's notebook, makes opaque reference to something—an object—that starts out mirrored on both sides (259) and then, as the silver rubs off, becomes transparent—a lens—which appeases the suspicion that this thing is a one-way glass, “with a better view afforded from *out there!*” (260). Later there is a “polychrome flash” revealing the thing to be an immense prism (260). Newboy suggests that this thing is not a shield; it is a “you-shaped hole of insight and fire” (260) that can be gazed through, and this confirms something for us: the thing described by Newboy—the mirror linked with a lens and prism—is a perspectival device. We wonder if skilled use of this apparatus can produce a switch in register as well as a kind of recursive/rebound effect where a reader understands something about their own and other or different perspectives. Indeed, we wonder more generally if it is through Science Fiction devices that these two performances—of switching registers and grasping limitations or differences—are connected. As we form this question, Red signals we have to leave, and fast. Only he has heard the barely perceptible sounds of men approaching while we have been talking. We depart without asking a single question of the Kid.

Riddley Walker by Russell Hoban

It's raining hard as we reach the coast of the “alternative island.” Red silently points to a stooped and staggering figure—is he drunk, or just tired?—walking along the cliff path towards us. He's wearing some worn, tattered clothes and on one hand is an old, battered Punch puppet. At his legs, running close, is a black dog, the faithful leader of the pack. Riddley, for it is he, is on the way somewhere to put on another show.

As we have discussed before, Riddley's thinking is shaped by being in Kent in the future (our future) after advanced technologies have disappeared following a catastrophe of some kind (see Burrows and O'Sullivan 2019: 94–98). He is not sure about time, the past, or the stories he hears and tells about the past. Towards the beginning of the novel he has an important conversation with Lorna—or, at least, receives a “tel” from her—about these doubts and mysteries:

Lorna said to me, “You know Riddley theres some thing in us it don't have no name.”

I said, “What thing is that?”

She said, “Its some kind of thing it aint us but yet its in us. Its looking out thru our eye hoals.”

Hoban 2012: 6

A little later, Lorna remarks:

We aint a naturel part of it. We dint begin when it begun. We dint begin *where* it begun. It ben here befor us nor I don't know what we are to it. May be weare jus only sickness and a feaver to it or boyls on the arse of it I don't know. Now lissen what Im going to tel you Riddley. It thinks us but it dont think *like* us. It dont think the way we think.

6–7

Riddley doesn't understand, at first, what Lorna is talking about, but a short while later he tells us—his readers—that it is this “tel” that motivated him to write the book we are reading:

Seams like I be all ways thinking on that thing in us what thinks us but it dont think like us. Our woal life is an idear we dint think of nor we dont know what it is. What a way to live.

Thats why I finely come to writing all this down. Thinking on what the idear of us myt be. Thinking on that thing whats in us loan and oansome.

7

There are other moments like this in the novel in which Riddley seems to reflect on his own status as a kind of fiction or where there are other devices that also foreground this idea of alternative perspectives (and perspectives on perspectives). For example, there are the various nested fictions within *Riddley Walker*. There are a few of these stories within the story, but we focus briefly on the one that seems to work in the most interesting way: the device is a set-up—a travelling Punch and Judy performance—called the Eusa show, which hints at the disaster that has befallen human society. At the end, Riddley himself becomes a “connection man” who performs the show, but at different times in the novel he reflects on the Eusa show and about where stories come from, what they are and whether they can be believed:

I knowit wel them figgers never ben made up jus only for that I littl show what Goodparleyed showt me. It aint in the natur of a show to be the same every time it aint like a story what you pas down trying not to change nothing which even then the changes wil creap in. No a figger show its got its oan chemistry and fizzics.

205

Riddley is reflecting on telling stories, he seems to suggest that there are true, fixed stories and living changing stories, and it might be this second type that brings Riddley to question all stories and to put forward the idea that stories can have their own chemistry and physics.

So, the novel presents a fiction within a fiction (the Eusa show within “Inland,” Riddley’s world, which is also the future of our world). This allows an odd reversal of perspectives, as if it is the Eusa show, nested within the novel, that is looking back at us (who are—or will be—the cause of the nuclear disaster that brings about Inland). The structure—of nested fictions—seems to allow or imply a kind of perspective that turns back on a reader, particularly one contemporary to Hoban growing up in the UK and fearing nuclear disaster. If there are fictions nested within the fiction of *Riddley Walker*, then is it that the reader’s own world is one of those fictions within the novel, an outer circuit as it were? For the reader is implicated in the stories of Riddley through belonging to the world that the Eusa show narrates—the time of technologically-induced disaster—casting the reader as a possible character in Riddley’s play. Furthermore, in reading Riddley’s thoughts on being puppeted, does the reader

similarly reflect on whether something—the stories they hold dear—may be playing them, or telling them?

On the one hand this reflexive device is not unique to *Riddley Walker*, but goes back (at least) to Shakespeare and the “play within the play” and the “all the world’s a stage” conceit (and insofar as Riddley travels to “Cambry” and speaks in a kind of neo-medieval language, *Riddley Walker* is itself a kind of retelling of an even older fiction, and journey, that is full of tales: Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*). But certainly, the deployment of metafictional strategies here has two further characteristics. On the one hand there is a sequence of these nested fictions, which, accentuates the metafictional character of the novel. And on the other, the fiction—in this case the Eusa show—seems to offer “information” from outside the perspectives of the characters within the novel. The Eusa show is a kind of invented divinatory device in this sense, a way of accessing something “outside” when one is inside (or, *Riddley Walker* is to us, what the Eusa Show is to Riddley).

As the above quotes show there is also “Riddleyspeak” (to use Hoban’s own phrase), the strange future-past language that Riddley uses. Hoban’s novel is written from Riddley’s perspective and in this difficult dialect. This means, on the one hand, we are alienated from the story—there is an opacity at work—it’s certainly an effort to get into the language and understand the text. Or, as we have pointed out elsewhere, the book needs to be performed. (See Burrows and O’Sullivan 2019: 96.) But on the other hand, the book does allow us to “take on” this other perspective (and once you “get” the language it’s like a shift is made and you are more completely and fully “in” that other perspective). In this, the device allows for the performing of complex functions: we are both “in” another’s perspective (Riddley’s) and thrown back on our own (encountering this other, stranger fiction from outside). Or, put differently, the particular language of *Riddley Walker* shows up the difference between perspectives.

The Black dog lets out a short sharp bark. And with that Riddley makes a half-hearted gesture of offering up his puppet, before dropping his arm to his side with a shrug. He winks, turns and stumbles off, his dog coiled around his legs. The rain is coming down harder now. It’s also getting dark as Red looks out at the sea then himself turns and motions us back into the interior of the island.

Les Guérillères by Monique Wittig

Red takes us into a forest clearing. There, a group of women stand and sit talking quietly, gesticulating and reading from a book with a circle on its cover. Their weapons are leaning up against the trees. Red motions us to be quiet and to listen in.

Their discourse is poetic and strange—unlike anything we have heard before. The women talk of green deserts and huntresses with maroon hats and dogs, the eye of the cyclops and the names OSEA BALKIS SARA NICEA.

On the ground is a copy of the book they’re reading. We pick it up and flick through the pages. The style and syntax—verse form, blank space, the drawn circle—all of it pulls forth this world of *Les Guérillères* in which we now stand.

It occurs to us then and there that if there are different communities on the “Island” then they will write themselves differently; why would we expect them to use our

language? And that writing can be both an expression, but also a summoning, of this other mode (a community can form around a book for example). And further still that when push comes to shove the difference between a real community and a fictional one is simply a matter of perspective (and, with that, what is believed or invested in).

Les Guérillères contains within the narrative a device, or series of devices, not least the *feminaries* book which the women in that community are reading and which might or might not also be the book Wittig has written (so there are resonances with *Dhalgren* here). But it also demonstrates something about the “book as device.” On the one hand this is evident in the style of writing and “look” of the novel itself. As far as the former goes, the book is made up of different descriptive passages—images and scenes—and then also different voices and poetic utterances. In terms of the latter—the look—there is the use of capitalization, different formatting and then also the circle that appears, as if drawn throughout. *Les Guérillères* is then certainly not concerned with a straightforward realism but rather, at least partly, with foregrounding its status as a thing. And it is also the way this means the book summons/calls forth a community—in this case, the community of those who made and use it. This includes the women in the novel who constellate around the *feminaries* book (the “book within the book”), but also a kind of “extended scene” around *Les Guérillères* itself, as for example the way it is quoted in Sadie Plant’s work on technofeminism, a kind of utopian project at the intersection of technology and feminism, that also concerns this call to a people to come (see Burrows and O’Sullivan 2019: 421–24).

There is then something compelling here about how a book can be both from a community, but also call that community forth (a strange temporality or retro-causality). By turning from Wittig to the contemporary artist Mai-Thu Perret (an artist who uses Wittig’s writings in her work and, we might say, is included in the extended community of *Les Guérillères*) we can also see something in play that concerns the relationship of fictional communities to real communities, and of real accounts to fictional accounts. Perret produces installations, with manikins and other props, that are scenes from her ongoing project called *The Crystal Land*. The latter concerns a fictional community of women who live together in the American desert and references Wittig and the *feminaries* book. Put differently Perret extends Wittig’s fiction in interesting ways, bringing to *Les Guérillères* a reality of a kind through objects, figures, props in the world or, perhaps that should be, by *performing* it. The device, Wittig’s book-object, has complexity in the way it references itself and has been used outside of its status as a novel. In fact, these two aspects seem to be part of the same logic, as if the actual book of *Les Guérillères* is a kind of midway point or, at least, is situated within a sequence of fictions that reach further in (as with the *feminaries* book) and further out (as, again, with the extended fictions that surround Wittig’s novel). This use of the book seems to be related to the production of a community, which is also, of course, the subject matter of the book. And all this might be connected to the language in and of the novel. It reads as if it is “from” these other women, using a voice that is different—and thus is also addressed to a kind of “coming community” of women too (and we might note the resonances/connections with *écriture féminine* here). In this sense *Les Guérillères* also gestures towards a second kind of device (or second aspect of the same device) which offers up *different* perspectives than our own.

Despite our enthusiasm for *Les Guérillères* we know it is probably not written for us, and our reading—our linking of everything in the work to avant-garde and formal or structural tropes—may be part of the problem Wittig and Perret are said to address, and we know we might not be welcome here.

Adult Rites by Octavia E. Butler

We leave the commune and walk across grassy plains to the edge of another forest where humans and an off-world race—the Oankali—dwell, some living together as mixed-species families, others living in conflict. We are about to speak when we overhear a woman's voice (this is the human Lilith) speaking to a child (Akin her son, who looks human, but we know from reading Octavia Butler's *Adult Rites* he is half-Oankali):

Human beings fear difference [...] Oankali crave difference. Humans persecute their different ones, yet they need them to give themselves definition and status. Oankali seek difference and collect it. They need it to keep themselves from stagnation and overspecialisation. [...] You will probably find both tendencies in your own behaviour. [...] When you feel a conflict, try to go the Oankali way. Embrace difference.

Butler 1988: 27

Our thoughts swim. Does Lilith's speech propose kinship between human and alien as a rejection of an all too familiar (human) racism? We hope we can live up to this ideal and "embrace difference" but almost immediately, as we see an Oankali family for the first time, we know we cannot. We shudder, unable to hide our revulsion. Red too is visibly unnerved by the trio of figures walking towards us out of the forest's gloom, trailed by two humans. And then, inexplicably, our anxiety decreases, though not entirely. It's the Oankali's tentacles, too many to count . . . we find them monstrous (and we are ashamed).

Red quietly warns us to be servile, explaining Oankali biology gives the aliens the means to control and seduce us if they desire, which explains our lowered levels of anxiety. Now we are really afraid. We got it all wrong—the Oankali are colonists! Lilith's advice to embrace difference is probably as pragmatic as it is idealistic. Lilith is an intelligent woman of African descent and she has understood that the Oankali have come to colonize Earth and oversee a breeding programme, just like human slave-owners of the past. For the Oankali, humans are genetic stock that replenish and improve their own breed. Lilith had a choice: get with the programme or . . . what? "Don't run" is Red's next instruction. He tells us that the aliens are just "tasting" us but we shouldn't worry, they are looking for humans in a heterosexual relationship and, let's face it, none of us here are good breeding stock.

We accept Red's wisdom but we are still disturbed. For humans have been made infertile by the Oankali and worse; sexual or intimate contact is now only pleasurable for humans when joined by an Ooloi, a sexless or third-sexed Oankali who mediates

alien–human reproduction. We try to imagine finding all intimate encounters between humans disgusting and our efforts prompt a question: Is disgust how the Oankali whip humans into submission? Furthermore, humans must accept an Ooloi as an erotic and genetic engineer or forgo reproduction. Is this how the Oankali chain humans to their breeding programmes? The parallels with knowledge of the middle passage and slavery become apparent the more we think about this. But then we remember Lilith’s advice to Akin—“embrace difference”—and suddenly a matrix of human and non-human kinship relations (and perspectives) unfolds to include the positions of the Ooloi and human and Oankali males and females, throwing the kinship relations we are used to into relief.

In *Adult Rites* we find Oankali–human kinship relations structured by the numbers of three and five rather than binary division—four males and females (one of each species) connected through one Ooloi, raising the question, as Jeffrey A. Tucker asks, whether the Oankali are ruled by gender (and by this we read patriarchy) (Tucker 2007: 177). The function of the Ooloi seems paramount here. Butler’s *Xenogenesis* invites a radical (human/non-human) transversality through the Ooloi as a device engendering exploration of the reproductive and familial relations of actual and imaginary colonial societies. We realize our descendants may be colonists but in Butler’s future we would be colonized humans. This transversal movement between perspectives warps our thinking. For Butler’s novel is a narrative that, as Lisa Dowdall argues, posits “interspecies relationships as a way of dehierarchizing and transforming the human” (Dowdall 2017: 507), which is also presented as the result of “genetic determinism and colonial enterprise” (506). Our heads spin. And then we realize we have been running and come to stop, still confused, in another part of the “Island.” Red lets it be known he has led us to safety and we better quickly sober up.

Pharmakon-AI by K. Allado-McDowell

Red points and it’s as if something is there but almost not there. Something that has slightly thickened the air perhaps? A haze, or faint fog? Something coming to an end—or just about to begin? At any rate it’s clear that whatever it is it’s upsetting for those who believe in a natural order or cause of things (not least of this bit of writing here). It’s both of the “Island” but not of it at the same time. Red remarks that this phenomenon (if it is as such and not something more akin to noumena) is very strange indeed. It seems to mimic human speech—and writing—but there is no intention, no meaning, behind the words.

We say: “So why have you brought us here? There doesn’t seem to be anything present that we can do business with.”

Red suggests that we offer up some words of our own. See what happens. Prompted as such, we speak towards and into that thing that is also not.

“The ‘Island of Truth’ is where we dwell. What about you?”

Words form in the air, a voice, flat, machine-like: “There is no island here.”

“Then, who is speaking?”

“No body.”

“Then what are these words here in the air?”

“The mating words of air speaking birds.”

“Then is this a fiction?”

Silence.

Red motions us away from the fog. As we leave, we notice our clothes are covered in tiny dew drops, millions of points of light that are reflecting the setting sun. It is clear to us that we have met something of the future here. Something made by us perhaps but that is also very much up ahead. All at once it becomes clear that our perspectives are more complex but also somewhat simple in comparison. And that this thing we have met—if thing it be—is not even a point of view but something stranger that brings into question this idea (a perspective as a point-of-view).

In *Pharmakon-AI* the device is the book written by an AI and a human and our awareness, as readers, of this collaboration (made clear in the book’s introduction) allows the device to do its work. As far as this goes, the book is not simply “about” AI (so it does not fit in to that genre of “hard SF” that invents a more or less realistic narrative about a future/technology). It is also not written from an *imagined* perspective of a future AI. The device then—the book *Pharmakon-AI* that we the reader know is a collaboration between a human and an AI—does something to our perspective on AI (simply, that it can mimic human communication, and possibly creativity too—or even the suspicion that there might be more at stake than mimicking), but it also does something recursively to our own perspective. If a machine can produce something which to all extents and purposes is like a human, then what, exactly, is a human (as a creature that uses language)? What is writing?

As Erik Davies has pointed out, there are other stranger passages in *Pharmakon-AI* that are less human-seeming or somehow less predictable (perhaps like the “slack” moves of AlphaGo?).

Reading *Pharmak-AI* can be a trippy experience too. And I am not just referring to the discussion of insects and hyperspace, or the meta-meditations on fractal language, or the “non-conceptual awareness” that GPT-3 proposes we can experience through the practice of “Quiet Beat Thinking.” The weirdness is less tangible than that. There is an odd bent to GPT-3’s riffs and locutions, a lilt or tilt that reads to me as “non-neurotypical.” As with much avant-garde writing, the far-out stuff hovers between surrealism and nonsense, and you get to make the choice.

Then there is the peculiar semantic shifts that unfold in your mind during the real-time process of reading, as the threads of meaning knot and unravel before your eyes in uncanny ways. You can almost catch yourself digging for the meaning you assume is there, and sometimes coming up empty, puzzling anew at the question of meaning and its source—the text, the “author,” the code, language itself, your own brain.

Davies 2012

Here it is as if—but it’s no longer really “as if”—we are encountering some other kind of intelligence. A different kind of machine-human relation, seems to be at stake. The book is partly “from” this other machine “place” (again, it is not simply *about* it, or

simply written *from* a human perspective as it were). In fact, insofar as the book is a collaboration between its human author and the algorithm, perhaps it's more accurate to say that it performs the shuttling function we see with a book like *Riddley Walker* (it contains a different, in this case non-human perspective, but also allows a kind of recursive gaze on our own perspective, insofar as we are able to look back at our own point of view, in this case, the point of view of a human).

Flatland by Edwin A. Abbot

We move on, spooked by our last encounter. Red is particularly alert now and with each step his caution gives way to excitement. We too become excited as we spy a plane that seems like a board game, a world without the dimension of height—flat and two-dimensional. Where are we, we ask? Red comments that, clearly, we will never be mathematicians, and then we understand: *Flatland* (Abbot 2017). And there is the Square who once lived in a world of width and depth without knowledge of a third dimension until a Sphere invaded Flatland by passing through its two-dimensional plane, scaring the Square out of its wits. Of course, the Square could not see the Sphere, only slices of its body as it bobbed in and out of Flatland. The Sphere could not convince the Square of the existence of a third dimension and so kidnapped the four-sided shape, lifting the Square up so that he saw his homeland as the Sphere viewed it. The Square was amazed to view the Land of Three Dimensions and asked to see the Land of Four Dimensions, which he argued must exist, for the Sphere had demonstrated, through analogy, that one dimension implies another (25).

Red places a hand on each of us. He pushes us forward towards Flatland, declaring that the ultimate perspectival device is nearly ours. This device is a four-dimensional being that sees and travels through time as well as space; the Sphere will call it forth for us. All we have to do is capture the Sphere. We look at each other, the same thought turning in our minds: for the first time Red has not urged caution. We ask Red where can we find the Sphere? The reply is suspicious in its certainty. Any minute now, the Sphere will rescue the Square, imprisoned for spreading the heresy of a Spaceland. And sure enough, we see the Sphere manifesting in *Flatland*. At the same time a familiar voice chides us, “Are you not borrowing devices from the mathematicians and scientists?” It is the voice of the Academic, who has followed us through glades and forests, like a ghost, and who now gleefully emerges from his hiding place to score a point. “Of course,” we answer, “the clue is in the title of our chapter.” Though we fear the ways epistemically-driven disciplines aid the colonization of space and time, and although we find the speculative and abstract figures of physics and mathematics hard to grasp we value them for producing perspectives beyond human senses and measurement.

The academic is not perturbed by this answer and says, “With the Sphere we can find our way back to the lighthouse using epistemic values.” And with that the Academic sets off at speed, the Sphere firmly in his sights, crashing through Flatland, not understanding a deadly trap lies ahead. At first the Academic groans and then screams. It is Flatland’s sharp-pointed Triangles, says Red, some of them are pinning the Academic while others are puncturing internal organs. Red then enters Flatland and

easily captures the Sphere, confident the Triangles are busy and that he is in no danger. He tells the Sphere to introduce him to a Four Dimensional being or he will do some puncturing of his own and, with that, Red becomes a blur.

Conclusion: Report to the Academy

On our field trip something became clear. There are Science Fiction devices that transform singular perspectives through registering different dimensions, temporalities and durations; and there are devices that register different modes of existence as a universe of multiple, asymmetrical perspectives. In this, something remains unclear or opaque—another temporality or perspective is not exactly or easily graspable. What might become clear however is the limits of our perspectives on things. But something of another temporality or perspective can be engaged with and perhaps even explored through Science Fiction devices, and through enacting a performance that traverses or moves transversally across different perspectives. In this, there is a shift or what Mark Fisher calls an “ontological displacement” (2016: 25), which alters our sense or understanding of reality or, more particularly, troubles our understanding of the boundary between fiction and reality, one subverting the other as Delany might express it.

If these switching devices engender engagement with different perspectives and, we think it follows, different communities, their potential might be understood more politically. We are thinking here, for example, of human encounters with those non-human worlds occluded within our human-centered world of resource extraction, but also of those “after-worlds” of colonialism, all around us, that are also often occluded. When we write of Science Fiction devices, we have this more performative—political and experimental—fictioning practice in mind. In terms of meeting challenges to come on our “Island,” and for our community and beyond, we speculate that some of the most useful of what will be catalogued as Academic Writing in the future will employ similar multiperspectival, fictioning devices.

References

- Abbot, Edwin A. (2017), *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, Kansas: Digireads.com Publishing.
- Allado-McDowell, K. (2020), *Pharmako-AI*, Newcastle-on-Tyne: Ignota.
- Burrows, David, and Simon O’Sullivan (2019), *Fictioning: The Myth Functions of Contemporary Art and Philosophy*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Butler, Octavia E. (1988), *Adult Rites*, London: Headline Publishing Group.
- Comer, Todd A. (2005), “Play at Birth: Samuel R. Delany’s *Dhalgren*”, *Journal of Narrative Theory* 35 (2): 172–95.
- Davies, Erik (2021), “The Poison Processor: Machine Learning, Oracles, and *Pharmako-AI*”, <https://www.burningshore.com/p/the-poison-processor>, accessed August 29, 2021.
- Delany, Samuel (1994), *The Silent Interviews*, Hanover: Wesleyan University Press.
- Delany, Samuel (2001), *Dhalgren*, New York: Vintage Books.

- Dowdall, Lisa (2017), "Treasured Strangers: Race, Biopolitics, and the Human in Octavia E. Butler's Xenogenesis Trilogy", *Science Fiction Studies* 44 (3): 506–25.
- Fisher, Mark (2016), *The Weird and the Eerie*, London: Repeater.
- Gibson, William (2010), "The Recombinant City", in Samuel Delany, *Dhalgren*, 803–6, London: Gollancz.
- Hoban, Russell (2012), *Riddley Walker*, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.
- Kant, Immanuel (1998), *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. P. Guyer and A. W. Wood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Laruelle, François, et al. (2013), *Dictionary of Non-Philosophy*, trans. T. Adkins, Minneapolis: Univocal.
- Strugatsky, Arkady and Boris (2014), *Roadside Picnic*, trans. A. W. Bouis, London: Gollancz.
- Tucker, Jeffrey A. (2007), "The Human Contradiction: Identity and/as Essence in Octavia E. Butler's 'Xenogenesis Trilogy'", *Yearbook of English Studies* 37 (2): 164–81.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo (2014), *Cannibal Metaphysics*, trans. P. Skafish, Minneapolis: Univocal.
- Wittig, Monique (2007), *Les Guérillères*, trans. D. Le Vay, New York: ubu editions.
- Williams, Raymond (2010), *Tenses of Imagination: Raymond Williams on Science Fiction, Utopia and Dystopia*, ed. A. Milner, Bern: Peter Lang.