

Dissolving Boundaries in the Anthropocene

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Kérchy, Anna, ed. *Posthumanism in Fantastic Fiction*. AMERICANA eBooks, 2018.

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Interspecies Dialogues in Postmillennial Filmic Fantasies and *Posthumanism in Fantastic Fiction*, two collections of case-studies edited by Anna Kérchy, emerge in the midst of the most fervent controversies of our age: the impending end of the Anthropocene. This term denotes the self-assigned superiority of human species over the rest of the lifeworld, and the harmful effects of this speciesist supremacy on Earth's ecosystems. In October 2018, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issued a special report, which called attention to the irreversibly catastrophic effects humans' exploitation of nature will have, if we continue to treat non-human life forms and our whole environment as lesser, passive, non-sentient commodities inferior to mankind, meant to be colonized by human needs. Kérchy's twin-texts resonate with this contemporary global scale concern: they illustrate how postmillennial human fantasies question the validity of the anthropocentric paradigm. With the aim to challenge the speciesist constraints of the Anthropocene, the most daring pieces of current theoretical and fictional artistic discourse articulate the vital necessity to liberate marginalized, non-human organisms, recognize their agency, and dismantle the reductive hierarchical categories that have been forced upon them in order to reveal an inherent interconnectedness of all beings and things inhabiting the planet. In other words, the very air seems to be teeming with a vibrant animism, which permeates the two collections published by Americana.

With a research background in intermedial cultural representations, Kérchy selects papers scrutinizing a wide array of media and genres. Many concentrate on popular cultural texts which hold a global appeal for mass audiences, hence prove to be the most sensitive and reliable barometer to determine the psychological shift from the Anthropocene. *Americana's* eJournal special issue *Interspecies Dialogues in Postmillennial Filmic Fantasies* examines various visual cultural products, television series, cinematic feature films, animations, picture books, and transmedia performances. These visual media encompass a plethora of genres: a fairy-tale film about shapeshifting, humanimal war drama, lycanthropic comedy,

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eco-horror, arthropod catastrophe movie, and monstrous psychological thriller. The *Americana* eBook *Posthumanism in Fantastic Fiction* focuses on verbal fantasies across genres like postmodern science-fiction dystopia, eco-horror, mythopoeia, (new) weird fiction, environmentalist picturebook, and proto-modern ghost story.

Despite the multitude of different media and genres analyzed, the case-studies form a seamless textual choreography since they all seem to arise from a conviction that interspecies equity is necessary as the most paramount prerequisite for a harmless coexistence in the biosphere. This sentiment is most beautifully expressed in the choice of covers. The picture designed by Edit Szűcs portrays a lioness and a girl who roar in unison, as if suffering from the same pain or perhaps wishing to demonstrate a power they possess together. In a similar vein, Zsófia Jakab's painting, *Swan Maiden* (2016), depicts the fusion of a girl with the skeleton of a bird; the contours of the two beings are not definitely discernible, implying that, in a sense, the animal and human share a common ontology.

Such redrawing of boundaries is the primary focus of many of the texts in question. In *Posthumanism in Fantastic Fiction*, Enikő Bollobás and András Bernáth both examine posthuman rhetorical devices used in literature. Bollobás distinguishes between the performative nature of the entities we call real and unreal, while Bernáth concludes that it is impossible to make sufficient distinctions between the two. Through the analysis of Lovecraft's weird tale "The Colour Out of Space" (1927), Daniel Nyikos offers a similar account of eradicating disparate categories; he relates the demolition of the laws of nature with Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection. The blurring of demarcation lines acquires a geographical aspect in András Fodor's probing of China Miéville's *The City and The City* (2009), where crossing between two parallel cities is only made possible by acquiring a posthuman quality. Finally, Korinna Csetényi offers a comparative analysis of SF and horror novels with contemporary animal horror movies to show how nature, formerly conceived as passive, gains active and monstrous qualities. While elucidating the twisted form of the traditional conceptualization of nature, she maintains that the monsters are never inherently malignant, they rather signify the noxious implications of human interventions.

Several of the studies contend that the ideas and ideologies which permeate contemporary popular cultural products display prominent posthuman characteristics. For instance, Annamária Hódosy identifies a clear relationship between female werewolf metamorphoses and patriarchal technologies of power. Gergely Nagy claims that a posthuman ontology is necessary for the full control of human theological discourse in Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965) series. Edit Újvári analyzes the medieval icon of the Hellmouth and proposes that the symbol dominated human fantasy to such an extent that this classic idea re-emerged in

the famous cinematic figure of the alien. Thus, she demonstrates how concepts of the posthuman can resist human manipulations of discourse throughout the ages and resurface in unexpected manners. Alina Gabriela Mihalache also highlights the vigor of the non-human. She compares various adaptations of Ionesco's play, *Rhinoceros* (1959), through which she charts the manifold ways animality is capable to invigorate otherwise abstract and somewhat inert ideologies.

The potency to act, affect, and outright subvert is often presumed to emanate from agency and in accordance with this train of thought, many of the artworks examined within the twin-volumes assign a significant degree of agency to non-human entities while reducing that possessed by human characters. Barbara Klonowska, for example, investigates *War Horse* (2011) by Steven Spielberg, a film in which a historical trauma is portrayed first and foremost through the perspective of a non-human creature. Through their analysis of Kathryn Bigelow's *Point Break* (1991), Márk Horváth and Ádám Lovász examine the function of performativity, however, they do not restrict it merely to human beings, they extend it to a rhizomatic existence of weeds. In an even more radical manner, Márió Z. Nemes reveals the outright dehumanization and "meatification" of humans through the cannibalistic figure of horror icon, Hannibal Lecter. Similarly, András Molnár claims that the fantastic world depicted in Thomas Ligotti's short story "Nethescurial" (1991) operates through the agency of non-human beings, a phenomenon he calls in Jane Bennett's words, "thing-power." László Sepsi and Dávid Levente Palatinus approach the issue of non-human agency in a slightly different manner for they do not merely consider non-human agency on its own, rather they investigate its effect on the psychology of human subjects. The former examines the psychological effects incited by animal horror whereas the latter problematizes how non-human consciousness is portrayed among the cyborgs of *Westworld* (HBO, 2016-) and what subsequent anthropocentric anxieties it induced in humans. Subversion takes place on many levels here. It does not simply invert the anthropocentric logic so that the non-human becomes superior while the human inferior. Rather, it foregrounds the agency of non-human organisms in order to emphasize that agency must be provided for all beings, otherwise anthropocentrism may lead to the demise of all life in the biosphere. This idea, I believe, is most fully conveyed in Péter Kristóf Makai's propositions; he analyzes Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014) and claims that human cognition is unable to properly process the chaotic manifestations of environmental disasters and that it would require an alien, non-human perspective to be able to aptly address these phenomena.

The most effective ways of exploring the post-anthropocene feature in contributions which extend the posthuman discourse to children and examine

their role in the scheme of things. In her article, Kérchy investigates how bioethical considerations surface within popular cultural products meant for children and young adults; in the special eJournal issue, she examines vegetal modes of existence of plant children within filmic fairy-tales. Zsófia Márki inspects the similar medium of myths and analyzes the figure of the selkie wife, paying close attention to its gendered implications. Zsófia Anna Tóth explores the capacities of feminist cultural pedagogy through the figure of the Mother Bear as it appears in Disney's animated film *Brave* (2012). Also in *Posthumanism*, Florian Zitzelsberger and Chengcheng You both postulate that their respective subjects of study—Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* (1971), on the one hand, and Mary Liddell's *Little Machinery* (1926) as well as Shaun Tan's *The Lost Thing* (2004), on the other—provide opportunities for children to actively engage in eco-political debates and envision a post-anthropocentric world.

Such optimistic world-visions may be far ahead in the future, for, as of yet, the Anthropocene is riddled with ethical dilemmas as Suzana Marjanić argues in her analysis of the oeuvres of feminist performance artists Tajči Čekada and Mary Britton Clouse. Nevertheless, as Kendra Reynolds and Éva Federmayer suggest in their respective articles in *Posthumanism*—the former exploring the “ecofeminist web of equality” in Michel Faber's novel *Under the Skin* (2000), the latter inoculating ecocritical interpretation with problematizations of gender, race, and class in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008)—by keeping in mind the innate interconnectedness of all beings, such visions can perhaps be realized one day. As Federmayer contends, “the prospect of earthly survival and well-being is staked on a new relationship with humans and non-humans, that of radical coexistence with the stranger.”

As a result of the multitude of dimensions incorporated into the twin-texts, *Interspecies Dialogues in Postmillennial Filmic Fantasies* and *Posthumanism in Fantastic Fiction* can most certainly be considered as seminal pieces within the posthumanist debate. The selection of case-studies all investigate popular cultural fantasies and as such, they are accurate reflections of how posthuman existence is conceived in the general public discourse. This aspect is further reinforced by the multitude of media and genres the twin-volumes deal with. The texts are balanced in the sense that they examine both the human perception of the posthuman and the possible effects post-human life forms may have of the human. Last, but not least, Kérchy's selection of texts considers transgenerational elements of the posthuman debate which might prove to be essential in the abolition of speciesist boundaries and the establishment of a post-anthropocentric biosphere.

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