

Switching Worlds, Facing Reality in the Landscapes of Imagination

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Limpár, Ildikó, ed. *Displacing the Anxieties of Our World: Spaces of Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2017. 229 pages. ISBN 9781443817028. Hb. £52.99

In the demanding, fast-paced milieus of modern Western societies, facing and coping with our anxieties have become a highly relevant concern, which is also reflected in the landscape of contemporary art. Displacing real-world fears into the terrain of imaginary spaces has been used for centuries to approach the worrisome questions of existence, and it also proves to be a method frequently employed today to explore troubling private and socio-cultural affairs (8). Furthermore, we can also enter virtual realities and become cyber-tourists, who discover faraway lands, embark on heroic quests, and face adventurous challenges, since computerized virtual spaces are also becoming increasingly popular.

Displacing the Anxieties of Our World, a collection of critical essays edited by Ildikó Limpár, concentrates on the role of fictive spaces in confronting and resolving distressing concerns in our personal and social realities through presenting papers that illuminate how fears and worries of different historical and geographical contexts shape and are shaped by the everyday life of people who often seek to find shelter in alternate spaces of living. The essays navigate readers through the imaginary terrains of literature, film, and video games, while establishing a dialogue between the aforementioned categories and embracing the mythical realms of sixteenth-century utopia, as well as twenty-first century dystopia (3).

The articles in the first part of the volume, “Imagined Journeys through History, Gaming and Travel,” focus on the wandering individual’s need to face his or her doubts far away from the confines of reality. The section begins with Donald E. Morse’s introduction of genres that can be linked to counterfactual history, such as the historical novel, fantasy history, alternative history, and the embedded historical novel. In his essay, Morse demonstrates the differences between these genres through works written about President Lincoln, including Stephen Carter’s bestseller, *The Impeachment of Abraham Lincoln*, Jerome Charyn’s historical novel, *I am Abraham: A Novel of Lincoln and the Civil War*, and Grahamé-Smith’s historical fantasy, *Abraham Lincoln: The Vampire Hunter*. Morse explores the genre of alternative history through Kim Stanley Robinson’s short novel, *The Lucky Strike*, where the past is altered with retro-corrective fantasies, resulting in a more positive turn of

Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies 24.2. 2018. Copyright © 2018 by HJEAS. All rights to reproduction in any form are reserved.

events, while he also examines the imaginative realities of Columbus narratives (18). Morse closes his essay with offering us a glimpse into the genre of the embedded historical novel through Robinson's *Galileo's Dream*, where a science-fiction plot is interwoven with the story of the historical Galileo. In his essay, Morse demonstrates how counterfactual versions of historical events may provide a way for disputable historical situations to be revisited and reconsidered in a different context, in an alternate reality (10). Péter Kristóf Makai's paper inquires into the cyber-spaces of video games, the player's experience and relation to cyber-realms, as well as to the challenges they propound through the virtual worlds of *Super Mario Bros*, *Fallout 3*, and *Sonic and Knuckles*. Makai investigates the narrative strategies and some recurring themes of video game spaces to observe their aesthetic functions in the light of culturally encoded metanarratives (27). He argues that virtual spaces can serve as a means of escape from present-day tensions, while, at the same time, they also reflect the gamer's worries and phobias, thus, they invite us into fantasy lands where we can cope with our actual fears. Part I of the collection ends with Csaba Maczelka's essay on Elizabethan travel literature author, Thomas Nicholls. Maczelka uses Milton's concept on the genre of utopia to explore the utopian characteristics of the authorial self-representation in Nicholls's work, emphasizing the function of paratexts that allow Nicholls to hide his real authorial identity and invent his fictional self as a suffering pilgrim in exile. He also underlines that literature written in the state of exile is always determined to be utopian, as its central motif is the displacement into an imaginary world, where the worries of the author, or that of his or her alter ego, can be re-examined in a different light (65).

The second part of the volume, "Political Anxieties and Fear of Dominance," invites readers to contemplate how social frustrations triggered by power relations can be envisioned in lands occupied by monsters. This section starts with Bill Clemente's paper on Alejandro Brugués's zombie comedy, *Juan of the Dead*, which gives a historical overview of Cuba's political and economic challenges in the years following the Revolution, and the troubled relationship between Cuba and the US. While offering a harsh criticism of the social and political situation in present-day Cuba, the film builds up an imaginative space where the unsettling concerns of everyday existence can be confronted. Clemente looks into zombie symbolism by describing how materialism and consumerism can turn us into zombies, and by demonstrating that dehumanizing a society by taking its autonomy away may also lead to such monstrous transformations (79). Julianna Borbély's article introduces the reader to the chilling world of the *Hannibal* TV-series. She focuses on evil's pervasive, inescapable, and irrational presence in our

reality, and reminds the reader how easily humans can be turned into monsters (5). Borbély analyzes the power game between Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham in the context of the “Lordship and Bondage” dialectic struggle outlined by Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, emphasizing the two characters’ interdependence to the end (88). Part II ends with Sándor Czeglédi’s essay on Vámbéry’s possible influence on the creation of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, where Stoker’s imagination designs one of the most widely known monsters in literature. Czeglédi argues that *Dracula* can be read as a fictive space, where the contemporary world’s Russiaphobia is displaced and coalesced (104).

“The Space of Fantastic Science and Scholarship” contains two essays, one by Anikó Sohár, on the parodic depictions of academic life in science fiction, and the other by Anna Petneházi, discussing the distressing existential questions raised in Christopher Priest’s *The Prestige*. Sohár’s paper, written on the fantasy works of Connie Willis and Sheri Tepper, reflects on a commonly debated view about higher education in twenty-first-century Western societies, suggesting that university professors form a group of isolated individuals who exist in the realm of theories, too distanced from reality to be able to teach students the necessary practicalities they need to navigate themselves successfully through the hardships of life. Petneházi, in turn, proposes that one of the challenges contemporary generations have to face is the idea of cloning. Due to the underlying uncertainties this unsettling experiment raises, many tales of cloning are projected upon fictive spaces either in the future or in the past, like in Priest’s novel, where this alarming theme is placed into a Victorian context. Petneházi uses Jacques Derrida’s “the dangerous supplement” to demonstrate how clones interrupt our binary perceptions of signifier and signified, of original and copy, and subject humans to a state of symbolic death (6).

The papers collected in the closing part of the volume, “Spaces Natural and Spaces Artificial,” investigate the connection between the imaginary spaces created in fantasy novels and some of the troubling social constructions modern societies established. Vera Benczik’s analysis embraces three fantasy novels: Neil Gaiman’s *Neverwhere*, China Miéville’s *King Rat*, and *Kranken*. In all three novels, the worries the protagonists are bound to experience during their quests are displaced into a fantastic urban space within the city of London, a setting that acutely reflects current metropolitan experience with its disquietude and agitations. Benczik claims that Gaiman’s and Miéville’s writings display the patterns of traditional epic fantasy, as the novels are rites of passage, and the narratives provide an insight into the transformation of the young questing heroes (165). Limpár’s essay focuses on

the mythic terrains of *The Hunger Games* trilogy, and reveals that artificiality proves to be a direct link between the arena and the Capitol (7). Limpár draws on Foucault's concept of heterotopia in discussing the arena. She also employs Joanne Tompkin's interpretation of heterotopia, and proposes that the arena can be treated as a theatre where fears and frustrations can be eased in spite of the arena's dreadful nature. In the final paper, Zsuzsanna Tóth suggests that fantasy writing is the appropriate literary tool to raise young people's awareness to the current environmental crisis, and to initiate constructive ideas that can help battle the threats the industrialized world imposes on the natural environment. She analyzes Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy from an ecocritical perspective, which motivates us to preserve our natural environment (201). She also observes the pervasive influence of Wordsworth and Blake on Pullman's trilogy.

The papers collected in this volume help us understand and navigate among the fantastic territories human beings created, and keep on creating, to distance themselves from both their personal and collective anxieties, as these may be faced and resolved more easily in an imaginary shelter. *Displacing the Anxieties of Our World* is an unconventional essay collection, as it embraces various fields of humanities to explore the role of alternate realities in our life. I recommend this volume for university libraries and scholars who wish to gain a more extensive knowledge of the cultural, historical, and literary contexts of a wide variety of fictive spaces presented in some remarkable literary works written in the genres of science fiction, fantasy, dystopian, and travel literature, as well as in films and video games.

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Work Cited

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