Esterino Adami, Francesca Bellino & Alessandro Mengozzi (eds.), *Other Worlds and the Narrative Construction of Otherness*

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This volume puts into practice what science fiction is supposed to do as a genre: it explores new worlds, creating connections and unveiling strategies while proposing hints and observations on the ways in which a kind of narrative that is extremely popular in the Western world has been interpreted and inflected in countries that are not in the West.

The collection was inspired by a conference held at the University of Turin, on May 13, 2014 and entitled "Luoghi e creature d'Oriente; dal fantastico alla fantascienza", that involved – among others – Carlo Pagetti, the Godfather of Italian academic criticism on science fiction. In many ways and through a deliberately interdisciplinary gaze, the work focuses, as the editors openly declare in their introduction, upon "the representation of otherness through the narrative construction of fantastic, imaginary, appalling and attractive places, stories, and figures". It seems quite a broad scope, if you look into it,

though Adami, Bellino and Menguzzi succeed in keeping their word, choosing to provide effective entry points to worlds and cultures where science fiction narrative has in fact been successful, even if in most cases totally ignored and forgotten.

The purpose of interlacing different cultures, triggering a dialogue between past and present, and working on local and global variables, is methodologically grounded in a perfect and articulated awareness of the tools of postcolonial and cultural studies, effectively applied to material involving not only the endless reservoir of science fiction proper, but also kin narratives such as comic books, oral myths, folk-tales, heroic narratives. All through this analysis, popular cultures reveal their extraordinary complexity, exhibiting in how many ways reality can be inflected in the fantastic.

Quite obviously, the macro-theme shared by all essays is to be found in a confrontation – cultural, linguistic, social and political – between the Eastern and the Western worlds. In practice, this brings about a number of reflections on the multiple and highly diversified ways in which this confrontation is articulated within the national tradition and filtered through a mostly oral reservoir of myths and stories whose mutual interaction produce a bright and unexpected flourishing of unusual turns, characters and thematic devices, all marked by a strong intertextuality. The resulting combination of different traditions, the multiplicity of hints that may be global and local, and the hybridity of textual elements, that evolve and stay in process while compared to each other, make for an interesting and original collection, that is worth reading.

Structurally, the book is organized as a "thematic tour", thus symbolically reproducing the passion of science fiction for the notion of a journey.

Section1, meaningfully entitled "Other Spaces, New Worlds", consists of two essays of different scope, both reflecting on how the tradition and the tension towards modernity may interact in the tradition of science fiction. In the first one, Alessandra Consolaro introduces a reflection on how Hindi science fiction often reveals the deeply grounded political assumption that, in order to have a good social system, you need good education and intellectual development: they are the only possible tools for material development, and they provide vital help in devising strategies of positioning and embodiment in a quickly changing national context. Ada Barbaro, instead, reflects on the penetration of the paradigm of anglophone science fiction into the Arab world, with particular reference to some authors whose works have proved extremely popular in the area (Huxley & Orwell, but also Asimov, Heinlein, Kim Stanley Robinson).

Section 2 ("Constructing Forms of Otherness") reflects on the narrative and psychological mechanisms that shape the stereotype or archetypal image of the threatening other. Cristina Colet analyses the paradigm of the so-called Yellow Peril through moving from Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee, while Graziella Acquaviva develops a reflection on Swahili imagery, emphasizing the way in which, in a whole area of Africa, the forms of the uncanny are drawn from ancestral mythology: "Zanzibar and mainland Tanzania are known as places were many types of spirits live". Zanzibar proves a particularly interesting case, because there, apparently, "the power inherent in an ancient system was mobilized to create chaos in a modern political mainstream by the re-enactment of an old narrative about hidden devils or *daimons* symbolizing true events of historical suffering".

The issues of language as a tool to build up styles, genres and texts is the focus of Section 3 ("(Re)Shaping Style(s), Language(s) and Discourse(s) of Otherness"). Adami concentrates on two Indian authors (Manjula Padmanabhan & Vandana Singh), producing seminal interdisciplinary observations on the articulate melding of the Western tradition and the Indian history. In the same section, Lucia Avallone analyses the way in which some Egyptian short stories published in the Sixties reveal the conflicts and contradictions in the real world through the fantastic. Devoted to female profiles appears the essay authored by Alessandro Monti, that moves from the Greek world to Hinduism as to point out shared forms of spiritualism taking the shape of female characters.

In Section 4 ("Circulating Fearful Otherness circulation of motifs and characters from antiquity to (post)- modernity"), Tommaso Braccini suggests considering the Testament of Solomon as an archetype originated in the Middle East and gradually absorbed into the West, showing how it inspired H. P. Lovecraft. Alessandro Mengozzi, with his account of Alexander the Great in India, shows the mutual relation between rhetoric and narrative, and Francesca Bellino focuses on the use of archetypical figures coming from Arabic literature in American comics (i.e. the mythic character of Ra's al-Ghul in the DC universe of Batman, by Frank Miller & Grant Morrison).

One may object that the act of comparing traditions and epochs that are so different may result in superficial analogies between legacies that are in fact so far apart as to be impossible to be put side by side. What happens in fact in this volume is that comparison is justified by the acknowledgement that some stereotypes tend to be universal, and that, at the same time, their specific inflections in some contexts contribute to making them extraordinarily effective.

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