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Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon, eds., *Edging into the Future: Science Fiction and Contemporary Cultural Transformation*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002. 280 pp. \$59.95; \$22.50 paper.

E *Edging into the Future: Science Fiction and Contemporary Cultural Transformation*, edited by Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon, will be useful to readers new to science fiction criticism, as it provides an excellent overview of the central concerns that currently preoccupy the field. It also boasts a few pieces that represent the best intellectual work SF scholars are producing today. The conceptual goals of the collection are relatively general; the editors state in their introduction that they wish to “examine science fiction’s complex intersections with this transitory present moment”; to “catch up to the imaginative futures being constructed in contemporary science fiction”; and to “disrupt the potential ossification of the sf canon as it has been developed through the academic teaching and critical writing of the 1990s” (2). Clearly, in suggesting that they are interested in how science fiction depicts the present and the future, the editors are casting a very wide net.

Hollinger and Gordon’s third aim, to loosen the perimeter of the SF canon, is somewhat more specific, and, indeed, one of the most exciting dimensions of this collection is its introduction of a host of authors new to academic discussion. If the mainstream SF criticism of the nineties focused almost exclusively on cyberpunk author William Gibson and a handful of writers working in a similar vein,

Edging into the Future reminds twenty-first century readers that there are many, many exciting writers working in and around the SF genre, some continuing the cyberpunk vision, others taking us off-world in previously unimaginable ways.

The thirteen pieces in the collection are grouped into three sections, entitled "Genre Implosion," "Imploded Subjects and Reinscripted Bodies," and "Reimagined Apocalypses and Exploded Communities." Anyone familiar with the scholarship on science fiction in the last fifteen years or so will recognize these as long-standing zones of interest. Much has been done on the blurring of generic boundaries between science fiction and other forms of cultural expression, and, as in virtually every other domain of literary and cultural study, the topics of the body and subjectivity have been discussed exhaustively in SF criticism. It is the third of these categories that suggests where the collection is opening up new areas for exploration, and, in fact, the best of the work in the collection appears in this latter section. As for the names of these sections, I can't pass up the opportunity to point out that there is perhaps more than the necessary amount of exploding and imploding going on here. As a scholar of science fiction myself, I am the first to admit that one of the unreconstructed allures of contemporary science fiction can be its pyrotechnics, both verbal and literal. Nonetheless, when we fall back on the incendiary vocabulary of the form itself in performing analysis of it, I fear we lose some essential critical distance.

Before assessing the very real merits of the collection, I do wish to comment on a particular shortcoming that, given the nature of edited collections, is perhaps unavoidable. The editors conclude the introduction with the words, "Welcome to the chatroom," a send-off I found ominous, given my own (admittedly limited) acquaintance with these particular cyberspaces. And, indeed, once I began reading the contributions to the collection, it was precisely their chattiness that I found most frustrating. Reading this collection provided me with the occasion to contemplate the difference between an "essay" and an "article." While I don't want to quibble over definitions, most of the pieces in this collection strike me as the former rather than the latter. To my mind, too few of the contributions articulate a focused claim that they then support. Instead, to one

degree or another, they offer a series of ideas on a topic. While many of the essays offer interesting information or flashes of insight, it is only the true articles in the collection that afforded what I regarded as really exciting, new ways of thinking about big categories.

One such outstanding piece is co-editor Joan Gordon's "Utopia, Genocide, and the Other," in which Gordon makes the startling but convincing claim that genocide and utopia are mutually constitutive concepts. To support her claim, she offers provocative analyses of *Celestis*, by Paul Park, and *The Sparrow* and *Children of God*, by Mary Doria Russell. What is so satisfying about her analysis of these texts is the way that she allows the material to take her to deeply uncomfortable and unconventional areas of investigation regarding the affiliation between the two political concepts we most abhor and esteem, respectively.

Similarly, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. also ventures beyond the conventional wisdom, in his case challenging the current dogma of literary criticism that presents the nation as a bankrupt social form. Like Gordon, Csicsery-Ronay makes a clear argument that he defends astutely: "Although fully in harmony with globalist theory, which perceives the withering away of the nation-state in the age of transnational economic and cultural flows, denationalizing sf, I contend, is based less on a purely rational perception of the logic of history than on the political perspective of the dominant technopowers, for whom national cultural identity represents an obstacle to political-economic rationalization, the foundation upon which their hegemony is based" (218). Csicsery-Ronay proceeds to suggest the five forms science fiction's disavowal of national identity takes and, in so doing, suggests the potential price of such a disavowal.

Yet again, in his contribution to the collection, Brian Attebery resists a commonplace assumption among science-fiction critics, this time that, since all master narratives have been overthrown, concepts like truth and knowledge have been rendered obsolete. Attebery is interested in writers who "see the observer's cultural biases and physical limitations not as bars to knowledge but as determiners of its form" (92). Specifically, he traces the ways that Gwyneth Jones and James Morrow "play postmodern skepticism and gender-bound scientific paradigms against each other to

generate fables about the emergence of new, self-critical, and self-revealing forms of knowledge" (107).

While less dazzling in their precision and suggestiveness, there are other very worthy pieces in the collection. In "Evaporating Genre," Gary K. Wolfe demonstrates a vast knowledge of science fiction and its siblings, fantasy and horror. He offers a fine-grained history of the evolution of the book-publishing industry in these fields and introduces readers to numerous titles that demonstrate the merging across these genres with which he is centrally concerned. His essential point is that, unlike other "pulp" genres, the fantasy genres are fundamentally unstable and are, as the title of his work suggests, "evaporating." A similarly informative piece is Brooks Landon's contribution, "Synthespians, Virtual Humans, and Hypermedia," which offers a broad discussion of where science-fiction film is going. Like Wolfe's piece, Landon's is rich in information and may take scholars in a number of interesting directions.

Other scholars in the collection cross theoretical or generic boundaries to examine social issues that, if mass culture can be understood as symptomatic, are very much on Americans' minds. Roger Luckhurst broadens an inquiry on the subject of rage, which has largely been focused on white men in cultural studies, to consider the rage of both men and women, whites and non-whites in contemporary science fiction. Veronica Hollinger, meanwhile, moves beyond the conventional boundaries of SF, looking at the work of mainstream writer Douglas Coupland in relation to the cyb-ur-text *Neuromancer*, by William Gibson, in order to speculate on the relation of contemporary culture to notions of the apocalypse.

In other works, we see old-school cyber-criticism brought up to date. Both Jenny Wolmark and Wendy Pearson participate in the well-established practice of applying postmodern gender theories to science-fiction texts. Their respective explorations of the posthuman and the hermaphrodite add to the important body of criticism that has underscored SF's potential to promote forms of radical difference. Rob Latham, meanwhile, turns to contemporary Marxist theory to analyze portraits of youthful consumer practices in recent SF. Latham suggestively concludes that the protagonists of the cyberpunk texts he has examined "struggle to realize a cyborg

agency latent in the estranged machineries of high-tech culture—an agency that popular posthumanist fantasies also articulate, even in their most distorted and commodified forms” (141).

The essays I found least useful in the collection were those that bore the most clear formal properties of the essay as a form. Unlike an article, an essay tends to take a very personal perspective in its analysis of its subject. Not coincidentally, all of these pieces in the collection were generated by science-fiction writers themselves. It is a common practice in such anthologies to include work, sometimes critical, sometimes literary, by major SF writers. While I think this practice has value, here the work by the writers seemed unfocused. Certainly, both Brian Stableford and Gwyneth Jones muse quite brilliantly on a wide range of scientific and cultural issues. Stableford’s discussions of biotechnology and the future ethics of reproduction were particularly wry and provocative. Yet in both of these writers’ essays, as well as Lance Olsen’s, the main show is an overview of at least part of their own writing careers. Such blow-by-blow accounts of the thematic concerns of their novels and short stories may prove to be of value to scholars of their work, but, on the whole, I do not believe that such work contributes as much to the enterprise of SF scholarship as the less hermetic pieces.

In sum, *Edging into the Future* effectively maps where science fiction has come in the last fifteen years and opens a number of new avenues of exploration for scholars in the field. It also confirms the vitality of science fiction as a cultural form that, even as it is transformed by its transactions with other genres and technologies, continues to provide insights about contemporary life as no other art form can.

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