Assessment 1: Reflective/Critical Essay
KWB118 Swords and Spaceships: Writing Genre
Semester 2, 2019
Tute Friday 11:00am–12:30pm
Bodhi Paine (n10536078)
words 2300 (not including in-text references)

Synopsis

Angles of Time: an Orbular novel

When malcontent drifter @ngle escapes from a raided conference of dissidents, she must unplug from the VR program Fabric to protect her anonymity. Unplugged, she witnesses the fabled Edge, where reality and virtual reality collide. When she is rescued by an enclave of 'literealists' who believe she is the manifestation of prophecy, she finally has a meaningful purpose.

Naught, a software engineer, has been exiled for research crimes and is now on the streets, his family left behind, with just a stash of cached data in his backpack. A shady character promises a return to his family if he steals and delivers a 'fragment' (a single instance of the Fabric program).

When @ngle and Naught meet, they begin to learn that their so-called destinies have been manipulated by hackers ~ they must escape the enclave and find a fabled community of dissidents to live away from online interference. Along the way, the truths they learn are far more destabilising than the wobbly trajectories of their own lives: reality is a projection of the mind; the truth will drive you mad; and madness is the only healthy way to respond to the truth.

The community they were seeking is little more than a disparate diaspora, not the idyllic hippy commune they had imagined. So they must learn to live among what society offers, making meaning and finding purpose among the chaos of a dilapidated civilisation.

This Just In: "New Weird Breaks World"
how New Weird stories help to dismantle attachment to paradigms

The New Weird is a long-running project of genre miscegenation, so my work is operating in a very broad context, especially when we consider that S R Delany (1989) said, 'A "genre definition" is a wholly imaginary object of the same ontological status as unicorns'. This means I feel free to participate in numerous genres by cherry-picking tropes according to the needs of my story and themes, which results in a long string of sub-genre compound adjectives: part quantum-sci-fi, part dark-urban-fantasy, part bildungsroman, part psychological horror/thriller, part post-apocalyptic adventure. Such an amorphous list of subgenre tendrils may constitute a limitation I will need to keep in check by remaining aware of my goals and intentions.

My work also exists in the context of 'literary genre fiction', by borrowing genre-fiction tropes while aspiring to the high aesthetic standards associated with literary fiction, especially dystopian novels, as listed in the bibliography. I am especially interested in exploring the consequences that may emerge from spiritual-awakening experiences continuing to be diagnosed as episodic psychosis. I hope to produce a text that is simultaneously entertaining and edifying about the nature of awakening, psychosis, and the experience of acute mental illness. In this goal, I am inspired by the work of sociologists David Kidd and Emanuele Castano (2013, 2017), who have reported that literary fiction (compared to genre fiction) has greater efficacy in cultivating empathy among its readers. I would like to produce genre fiction that has the same efficacy in improving empathy in its readers.

According to Noys and Murphy (2016), the Weird emerged in 'the hothouse of late-Victorian and Edwardian low culture [...] reached maturity in the "pulp modernism" of H P Lovecraft', and experienced an 'appropriately discontinuous and mutant existence' through the 80s and 90s, mostly in pulp distribution, until it was canonised as 'a sustained

international tradition' by the publication of Ann and Jeff VanderMeer's anthology *The Weird* in 2011. The Weird was then divided into 'Old Weird' and 'New Weird' when John Harrison coined the term 'New Weird' in response to the fiction and criticism of China Miéville. The Old Weird includes the work of Edgar Allan Poe. The New Weird includes the fiction of Clive Barker and Thomas Ligotti in the 1980s and achieved 'its most explicit articulation in the 2000s', but has waned in popularity since then. I hope to join its revival.

Contemporary influences include China Miéville, Melissa Marr's Weird West novel, *The Arrivals*, some work of Jeff VanderMeer, *The Cipher* by Kathe Koja, and *The Etched City* by K J Bishop. *House of Leaves* by Mark Z Danielewski is inspiration for unorthodox (psychological and physical) horror. *Going Bovine* by Libba Bray is an example of how New Weird authors are depicting quantum physics and hallucination in fiction. *Lock In* by John Scalzi is (a bad) example of how authors are treating virtual reality in fiction. Other speculative influences include works of Franz Kafka and Philip K Dick, as listed in the bibliography.

A central thread in the critique of the New Weird is that the stories tend to interrupt our attachment to a commonsensical view of reality, leading to a reader's psychological 'estrangement' from the dominant paradigms of belief that seek to normalise one conception of reality over another (Noys and Murphy, 2016). My work is a continuation of this tradition. It will be a literary genre novel that seeks to disturb our complacent attachment to antiquated social and economic ideals with the intention of making way for marginalised and oppressed worldviews.
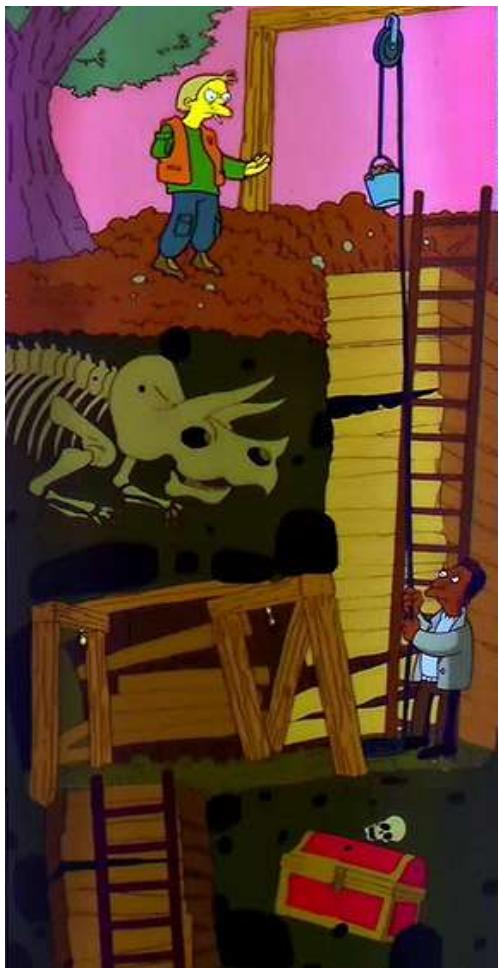
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The New Weird text I am developing will feature narrative tropes from science-fiction, fantasy, and horror, respectively: a future-ish setting[1], interdimensional possibilities (replete with wormhole featuring a Funny Terrain Cross-Section), high-tech computer technology (such as AI-augmented VR), and secondary worlds; mythological beasts (of burden, war, and leisure), prophecy, magical talismans, and weapons/tools of 'extranatural'[2] power; and apparently mystical abilities that may cause frightening episodes of psychosis if they are not wielded with precaution and wisdom.

I am interested in science fiction as 'a literary genre dealing with scientific discovery, superior or simply other than that known to exist' (Stockwell, 2014), because I want to explore ideas about the nature of perception, phenomena, imagination and reality from the perspective of the allegedly debunked approach of philosophical idealism. Science fiction is also a profoundly accessible genre, 'largely a paperback phenomenon, which puts it into the hands of the literate masses' (Stockwell, 2014), which means that work in this area may reach an audience larger than works that are strictly limited to the genre of literary fiction. Suvin (1972) has mentioned

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[1] I use the term 'future-ish' because the true temporal setting of the story is a matter of question within the world I am building.

[2] I use Michelle L Eilers (2000) definition of 'extranatural' here, to distinguish these powers from the 'supernatural', which 'carries a religious connotation' of a force that is *superior* to natural or material forces, whereas I want to convey the existence of a force that is simply *other* than (known) material processes.

that science fiction has had a 'significant cultural effect' on 'general readers appreciative of new sets of values', which is exactly the sort of readership I aspire to reach.

I am interested in 'urban fantasy' because, as Mannolini-Winwood (2016) says, the genre 'comments on our inherent fears and anxieties of contemporary urban life', whereas the fantasy genre it evolved from depicts these fears and anxieties in a setting removed from our real daily life, which renders it less affective for contemporary readers. For guidance on themes I will refer to the work of existential psychiatrist Irvin Yalom (1989), who contends that anxiety arises when we fail to reconcile our fears of the 'four givens' of existence: death, freedom, aloneness, and meaninglessness. By using such psychology as a guideline I will constrain my tendency to muddy a story by trying to explore every theme in existence.

And I am interested in psychological horror/thriller because it provides context for exploring the above anxieties, especially as they arise around the boundaries between perception, imagination, reality, and hallucination. Art critic and philosopher Donald B. Kuspit (1968) says imagination is less real than perceiving an object itself. Compare this to the consciousness research of Anil Seth (2017), who says 'consensus reality' is no more and no less than a collective, agreed-upon, hallucination. If something imagined is real because it exists (in the imagination), and so-called real phenomena exist only as images within our consciousness, reality is no more or less real than imagined phenomena or hallucination. @ngle's challenge of reconciling these paradoxical views of reality is what I hope will give rise to the tension of psychological horror in the story. To keep the text entertaining I may need to refrain from including long-winded and discursive reflections on subjects such as consciousness research, lol.

I am interested in 'literary genre fiction' because I agree genre fiction and literary fiction are not mutually exclusive (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010). Genre fiction's focus on subject and plot compared to literary fiction's focus on theme and character often results

in genre fiction that is less affective than literary fiction (Kidd & Castano). I want to challenge this by maintaining a blend of subject, plot, theme, and well-developed characters with a strong sense of authentic and idiosyncratic voice. For the purpose of estrangement, I will use the techniques of magic realism to depict unusual phenomena as though it were usual, because, as Suvin (1972) says, 'The effect of such factual reporting of fictions is one of confronting a set normative system – a Ptolemaic-type closed world picture – with a point of view or glance implying a new set of norms.' The New Weird, being 'attentive to both its pulp and its high culture influences and roots' (Vint, 2009), is the perfect genre to be doing this in.

At this stage of manuscript development, I am less aware of how I will treat specific tropes (e.g., interdimensional travel) than I am aware of how I will treat the tropes of broader narrative structure. Classic tropes, including the hero's journey and rags-to-riches narrative arcs, are borrowed from mythology via the work of Joseph Campbell (2017). I will be subverting aspects of these archetypal plot structures because they reaffirm values I don't necessarily share: for example, the Meeting with the Goddess and Atonement with the Father tropes will be subverted to depict the characters' experiences of self-love and true identity, rather than an experience of empowerment through reconciliation with a parental figure. By subverting these tropes I hope to depict a process of self-individuation and -determination, with characters evolving through their own internal resources rather than depending on parental figures or their equivalent institutions within society.

While @ngle's narrative is based on Campbell's monomyth of the hero's journey, Naught's is based on the rags-to-riches plot, which I have modified to 'rags-to-rages', because Naught encounters insurmountable difficulties in realising upward social mobility in the economy of this secondary world: as we witness @ngle escaping from the materialist myth via the hero's journey, we simultaneously witness Naught's increasingly frustrated

attempts to realise the goal of that myth (material security), and the rage he feels about being denied the opportunities to do so. By juxtaposing the myth of the material dream with the modified hero's journey, I hope to convey that the journey of self-individuation is more important and fulfilling than pursuing the elusive prospect of material security (the belief in which myth is exactly what keeps us enslaved to an unsustainable economy in service of economic progress). The New Weird, being a 'transgressive and progressive genre' (Ersoy, 2019), which 'provoke[s] us to see how the world might be otherwise' (Vint, 2009) is the perfect sandbox for this experiment.

My work will also subvert the trope that all stories have clear resolutions: it won't be an anti-novel, exactly, but there won't be a typical happy ending in this story – just the implication that the end of one journey is often only the start of another, in the psyche and in the world. Instead of a known–unknown–known journey, Naught and @ngle will move from known to unknown and get stuck there, forced to reconcile their coping mechanisms with confounding ontological ambiguity. Paul Mitchell's novel manuscript, 'Reunion Gig Blues' (2019), is a good example of how a denouement of inner realisation is often just the beginning of self-change into unknown new psychological territory. I want the whole story to feel complete in its own right at the same time as feeling like just the premise of another story, though it's not necessarily a series' prequel. Striking the balance of an open-ended conclusion that feels complete is a challenge I need to face with wide reading.

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The core challenge I face in developing this manuscript is the difficulty of translating character-development and world-building notes into actual prose: I feel adept at conceptualising character, secondary-world elements, and plot structures, but I frequently encounter a barrier in feeling able to bring them to life on the page. A strength is an unashamed willingness to ask for support in dealing with this, so that for example I gleaned the advice from our tutorials to just go ahead and info-dump during drafting, then

use this expository material as a supply of information to interweave in the developing story during editing, among description and narrative. I will also read texts that use techniques I want to explore in my fiction, such as the multiple points of view in *The Fifth Season* by N K Jemisin.

A core goal of my work is to expose the inner-workings of reality that are not immediately clear on the surface of our perceptions, whether that be our perception of perception itself, the machinations of international power, or the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. To this extent, I share the mission of Ian Rankin, as stated by Eleanor Bell (2008): to invite 'the reader to probe beneath everyday appearances in order to better understand the complexities of modern identity and belonging'. Our sense of identity and belonging are very much determined by our relationship with the structures and ideals of our institutions, which I want to expose as arbitrary human constructs.

For example, Mark Fisher (2010) has used the term 'capitalist realism' to denote the belief that neoliberal capitalism is the only commonsensical economic ideology we could possibly live by today. I want to use fiction to destabilise readers' subconscious attachment to such beliefs, in the hope that doing so will create room in our collective psyche for new and innovative institutional ideals.

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