

BOOK REVIEW

STUBBORN DARK
OBJECTS OF THE
FUTURE

Brian Willems. *Speculative Realism and Science Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017, pp. 223.

The book's opening sentence "The real monsters are not aliens from outer space but humans on Earth" (2017: 1), signals that science fiction *sensu stricto* will not be at the core of Brian Willems' discussion. In its place will be a science fiction that calls for an epistemological tectonic shift, necessary for grasping the contemporary fictional futurities that have sprouted from a human condition increasingly labelled as anthropocentric. To achieve this, the author appropriates the paraphernalia of a relatively recent theoretical and methodological field of speculative realism, which debates ambiguities and the unknowable. Rather than addressing the workings of the classical sf trope of extrapolation, Willems' book bespeaks those objects in Cormac McCarthy's, Neil Gaiman's, China Miéville's, Doris Lessing's, Paolo Bacigalupi's and Kim Stanley Robinson's novels that "resist incorporation into any past, present or future scientific understanding," since they "indicate an independence from human thought or perception" (7). Hence, instead of selecting the most obvious (or safe) aspects of the sf and fantasy works he has selected, Willems takes the reader on a meandering journey, tracing those stubborn dark objects that defy

anthropocentric thought and represent an alternative to human-organised knowledge. They create an ambiguous space, in which the human and the non-human mutually collapse and reassemble into a novelty that might reveal strategies for a more positive reimagining of the Anthropocene's currently bleak blueprint. What Willems looks for, and successfully detects, is an invigorated Suvinian novum of speculative fiction.

Relying on the theoretical underpinnings of the central figures of speculative realism – such as Graham Harman, who introduced the concept of object-oriented philosophy, and Quentin Meillassoux, famous for his critique of the post-Kantian philosophy embedded in correlationism – as well as engaging with pundits of sf theory, such as Darko Suvin, Willems introduces his own "theoretical novum:" the so-called "Zug effect", which reflects a shift in world-making strategies, and applies it to the selected fiction in order to debunk the allegedly hopeless era of the Anthropocene.

Chapter 1 is dedicated to the Zug effect, and will hopefully become a crucial theoretical reference for scholars interested in contemporary fiction in general. Willems briefly discusses some of the famous scholars who touch upon sf in myriad ways, from structuralist, poststructuralist and philosophical perspectives. He focuses on the science in science fiction that does not gel smoothly with literary objects whose point of origin and temporal frame is ambiguous and non-extrapolative: those objects that are rooted in "messy science in the making" (7). The easy way out of this conundrum could be a simple appropriation of Miéville's claim that "sf is not about accuracy, but about the appearance of accuracy" (99) developed through persuasion, or of Meillassoux's

introduction of extro-science fiction, based on "strange events that are destined to be forever bereft of explanation, that do not have or are not expected to have a scientific explanation" (10). Willems rather constructs a new trope that he names the Zug effect, to refer to "organisations of knowledge that elude explanation" (14). He borrows this concept from Damon Knight's 1964 sf novel *Beyond the Barrier*, whose protagonist, physics professor Gordon Naismith, is sent to the past, and becomes the sole being who can kill the last remaining Zug, a monster that feasts on humans. Akin to the protagonist of Guy de Maupassant's short story "The Horla", Naismith finally discovers that he is the monster he has been sent to kill. To emphasise the paradox of Knight's protagonist, Willems refers to Levi Bryant's concept of "dark objects", the signifiers of unknowability that are connected to anything in unpredictable ways (17), with the world they inhabit identified as Meillassoux's Type-2 world, an non-axiomatic world whose "irregularity is sufficient to abolish science, but not consciousness" (Meillassoux qtd in Willems 16). This is why it is crucial for Willems to top Suvin's cognitive logic with Meillassoux's speculative realism, to stress a type of cognition that lacks resolution and consequently results in the simultaneous withdrawal and connection of objects. The purpose of this approach is not to reject the human condition, but to locate it within others, including objects. Or in the author's words, "the Zug thus brings together three main points that will be developed throughout this book: a separation of the essence of an object from its qualities, or what Harman calls fission (Harman 2012: 243); the joining together of an object of qualities which seem 'unnatural' to it, or

what Harman calls fusion (240); and the tension created out of such moments of separation and gathering. It is believed that a focus on non-human objects is one way for such separation and gathering to be represented in fiction" (29). Hence the Zug effect is a dark object as well as the world it inhabits. That world is non-extrapolative, since it establishes unexpected connections among objects, but is also extrapolative as it "draws its power from the withdrawn nature of objects" (37). The result is the invention of "non-Anthropocene futures" (37).

The rest of the book is an interesting and bold testing ground for the Zug effect in order to explore the withdrawn, allegedly impossible nature of dark objects. Chapter 2, entitled "Divine Paraphrase: Cormac McCarthy", is dedicated to McCarthy's award-winning postapocalyptic novel *The Road* (2006), which is about the journey of a father and a son across a devastated landscape following an unnamed catastrophe. Contrary to the usual reading of the novel as deeply dystopian, Willems reads its inherent darkness as a sign of potential, especially through the Christ-like character of the boy. He refers to Eugene Thacker's concept of a world-without-us, wherein humans are erased from the world, which still exists, and to Timothy Morton's notion of the end of the world, where there is no longer a world-for-us but a world-in-itself, a concept that has permeated Morton's ecological thought for the past ten years. Willems maintains that in *The Road* the world is the natural habitat of the boy, and not the father. As a figure of language lost, the boy represents a wordless place of darkness and silence, freed from the father's pre-apocalyptic anthropocentrism, and hence more firmly rooted in the world he inhabits.

Chapter 3, entitled "Double-Vision: Neil Gaiman", discusses Gaiman's two novels, *American Gods* (2001) and *Anansi Boys* (2005), and his short story "Hot to Talk to Girls at Parties" (2006). To argue the double vision of these works, Willems uses a plethora of theoretical terms from philosophy and literary theory, which make the withdrawn dark objects visible and free from anthropocentrism. These include Avita Ronel's notion of stupidity as a "mechanism for the way the unknowable can become visible" (62), Levi Bryant's "dormant object" that "does not communicate with the human domain, although nonetheless it is something to which we have access" (63), and Steven Shaviro's modulation "resist[ing] the very transformation that it also expresses" (67). Willems' key argument is that Gaiman's works challenge new materialism because their dark objects dismantle the world by being and signifying multiple, often contradictory, things at once.

Chapter 4, entitled "Subtraction and Contraction: China Miéville", focuses on Miéville's acclaimed novel *Perdido Street Station* (2000), a hallucinatory story set in a decrepit and decadent futuropolis inhabited by humans and an outlandish menagerie of other sentient species. Willems goes a step further in his examination and dismantling of the novelistic world by using Gilles Deleuze's concept of the assemblage as a "gathering of parts which is not necessarily taken as a whole" (88), and Manel DeLanda's readings of subtraction and exteriority wherein elements do not relate to each other in terms of what they are, but of what they do. Willems focuses on the characters of Lin, Mr Motley, the Weaver, and the "crisis engine" developed by scientist Isaac, which can enact any kind of change by merging three entities: a human, a

construct, i.e. a robot with consciousness, and a Weaver, the only species in the novel that can defeat the slake-moths, which are the source of all evil. The purpose is to discuss Miéville's "paradoxical ontology", which lays bare an ontological instability at the very core of reality, since, as Willems maintains, Miéville's fictional world "needs contradiction to function" (110), while the unrepresentable and unstable qualities of his characters/dark objects should be grasped as their very essence.

Chapter 5 addresses Doris Lessing's novel *The Cleft* (2007), a genesis-like story of the origins of sex and gender. Again, Willems does not analyse the work as a specific feminist tract, but takes on the notion of Harman's fission and fusion to raise the issue of a symbiosis that initiates change in the dark object. The dark objects in this case are the eponymous Clefs, near-amphibious women who do not need men since they are impregnated by a wave, a wind or the moon. When the men (called the "Monsters" or the "Squirts") finally arrive (or rather survive), the Clefs shift from their usual qualities and undergo change. This, Willems maintains, in turn opens the possibility of a new stage of life.

Willems dedicates his extensive sixth chapter to Paolo Bacigalupi's award-winning debut novel *The Windup Girl* (2009). This dystopian work is set in a future Bangkok, where the protagonist Anderson tries to develop fruits immune to plague. Here he meets the windup girl from the novel's title, a bioengineered artificial human called Emiko. Again, Willems departs from the established criticism of this novel, which was praised for its cyberpunk qualities but also criticised for using pseudoscientific arguments to advance its plot. Instead, he takes a different

approach to discuss the manner in which the nature of the withdrawn dark object is revealed. In Bacigalupi's work, symbiosis, the tool of change introduced in the previous chapter, is disrupted and then reassembled. Relying on Samuel Delany's concept of "inmixing", which challenges the cognitive logic necessary for Suvin's novum, Willems focuses on three dark objects in the novel that foreground the concept of unexpected symbiosis between the human and animal experience: a new fruit called ngaw; a megodont or genetically engineered mammoth; and Emiko, the windup girl. Each object undergoes the fission of properties from its essence, and the fusion of those from another object. This is not just a representation of what is known in sf as a "big dumb object", nor is it an example of metamorphosis. Rather, this is the narrative inmixing of a series of contradictions within the same entity, which results in an unexpected (or, from the Suvinians' point of view, non-extrapolated) symbiosis. Moreover, the purpose of this symbiosis is not to provide resolution, as Suvin's novum should do, but to argue that objects may have antagonistic coordinates that cannot be resolved.

Before the final chapter, which recapitulates issues raised earlier, the last analytical chapter "Transcription: Kim Stanley Robinson" considers several novels by this American sf author, with special emphasis on *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002), an alternate history novel that imagines a world in which Islam has become the dominant religion. As suggested by the chapter's title, Willems appropriates the concept of transcription from musicology to develop a model of transformation of objects that "expose[s]

unexpected qualities of the original piece" (189). As he argues, the strategy of transcription is relevant to speculative realism, since it is an "indirect strategy for representing the withdrawn nature of objects" (190). However, transcription will never result in Meillassoux's Type-3 world, in which neither science nor consciousness is possible, a world whose postulates are akin to Alice's Wonderland. Rather, transcription is about the "tension between laws and freedoms, limits and agency. When the tension between the two is foregrounded, a new phase of being is possible" (195).

Willems' innovative book introduces and gradually develops an epistemological shift visible in contemporary fiction, which is not only necessary for the survival of the characters in the discussed works, but may also come in handy for our own survival in the Anthropocene. The morass of the Anthropocene looks bleak, and there seems to be no anodyne version on the horizon. However, Willems' take on contemporary sf and fantasy, which voices much of what may lie ahead for our telluric existence, is provocatively positive. The cue lies in Willems' Zug effect, which introduces sense to nonsense and explains what lies beyond traditional science and experience. In this realm of a reformed sensual world, there lie dark objects whose nature should be embraced not as supernatural but as super natural. Similar to Timothy Morton's conclusion to *Dark Ecology* (2016), in which the reader is invited "to disco", Willems' Zug effect invites us to *stop worrying and love the bomb*, which, indeed, is the best recommendation for seizing the Anthropocene.

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