

Babeş-Bolyai University

Faculty of Letters

DOCTORAL THESIS

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DOCTORATE THESIS

The Shape of the Novel in the
Anthropocene: Hybrids, Spectres, and
More-Than-Human Worlding

THESIS SUMMARY

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The thesis *The Form of the Novel in the Anthropocene: Hybridisations, Spectralisations, and More-than-Human Worlding* traces the various forms the Anglophone novel, with an emphasis on hypercontemporary literature, the novel in the last decade or so, periodised as the ‘metacritical Anthropocene’, to reflect the realities of an age of ecological and epistemic collapse and to find modes of ‘fabulation’ that illustrate the complexities of this age.

The Anthropocene has been thought of as a ‘hyperobject’ (Morton) precisely because it resists representation. In the hypercontemporary novels, the challenges of representation relate to: 1) the interweaving of human temporalities with ‘deep time’ (the time of species evolution and geological movements); 2) various forms of contagion and hybridisation that reflect what I have called ‘porous skins’ in the Anthropocene, following the new materialisms and phenomenologies, attentive to the continuous flux between humans, environment, and technology, reflecting a more-than-human world; and 3) the integration of the ‘extraterrestrial’ (Marshall), *i.e.* radically nonhuman perspectives, and what I have called a ‘distributive’, interstitial agency, that advances the narrative through the space between the characters and their environment, an environment that is, in fact, a vitalist form of ‘active landscape’.

I have identified several ways in which the novel resists these challenges. I return throughout the study to the concept of ‘fabulation’, which also seems to be a method within Anthropocene studies. As I have pointed out, a ‘fabulation is a speculative gesture that offers a finer description of the new possibilities, effects, and ethical challenges that the natural sciences, (post)humanities, and everything in between make possible’. These fabulations are not metaphors but speculative descriptions of reality. For example, the fact that skin has pores is a material reality, but the way we conceptualise it pertains to fabulation.

Another mode of resistance is ‘spectral realism’ (Eugene Tacker), which appeals to monstrosity, aberration, or error as the very conditions of life, recovering mystical traditions and female religious experience. For both the mystic and the biologist who feels the sublime contagion in Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation* (2014), there is a transfigured body, both the mystical and ecological experience being recorded on the skin. I insist on the idea that this sublime material plasticity is primarily a feature of the landscape. However, through her transformation, Ghost Bird also achieves a form of sublime contagion, as a form of life that emerges from death and through the shamanic reconfiguration in the depths of the ‘Tower’. Under the ‘prismatic’ influence of the genetic reconfiguration of Area X, the transformation suggesting a resurrection-based eschatology also emerges as a spiritual aesthetics of compost.

Such an integration of ‘spectrality’ into the definition of realism seems necessary to me at a time when Anthropocene studies are rediscovering how accidental contagion profoundly changed human evolution. In other words, the ‘human’ is always ‘more-than-human’, traversed by and intertwined with diverse ecologies. At the same time, the recent discovery in Nature about the possibility of ‘dark’ oxygen at the bottom of the ocean creates speculative scenarios about the origin of life. Julia Armfield’s *Our Wives Under the Sea* (2022) metabolises the fluidity between the body and the environment, in the footsteps of new materialisms, notably Astrida Neimanis. The encounter with the ‘monstrosity’ and the vastness of the ocean is not a Cartesian encounter, cataloging and naming, but a visceral one. The sea functions simultaneously as a planetary metabolism and an archive of human excesses and horrors. ‘Spectralisation’ is one of the modes that realism, if it remains a ‘mirror of reality’ in the Anthropocene, must incorporate. Such ‘spectralised’ novels, however ‘unrealistic’ they may seem, reflect fundamental changes in the field of natural sciences and interdisciplinary studies.

Yet another mode of resistance is the very structure of the novel, which often renounces linear narrative and the restoration of social order through denouement. Social order is no longer a given; disorder, ecosystemic and social imbalance is the new ‘normality’ in the Anthropocene, which is why there is no ‘initial situation’ to which the characters can return. Novels such as James Bradley’s *Clade* (2015), which thematises ecological collapse, end in a suspension in uncertainty. It defies both apocalyptic teleology and the clear promise of rebirth. The character is confronted with an image of the potential end of the world, which, through her capacity for the ‘metamorphic sublime’ (Taussig), it becomes an occasion for sharpening perception and sensibility, a sense of ‘re-enchantment’ or numinosity in the midst of nature.

Moreover, the novel overcomes the challenge of reflecting “deep time” through the huge temporal leaps it achieves at key moments. The advancement in the narrative occurs by shifting perspectives from one generation to the next, forming a “clade” (a scientific term for descendants of a common ancestor). The ‘geological strata of the novel’ are precisely these leaps, each of them a rescaling of time, bearing the traces of the ancestors, like a palimpsest.

A borderline case of resistance is Kim Stanley Robinson’s novel *The Ministry for the Future* (2020), which responds to the problem of scaling, the huge temporal leaps required to reflect more-than-human realities, not through formal innovation but through a revival of science fiction literature. The novel proposes a speculative financial technology, the ‘Carbon currency’, capable of producing an ‘optopian’ future (Robinson), that is, a desirable future, not necessarily the best, but one that is still possible. The novel applies financial concepts in an ecological context, such as ‘shorting the present’ or ‘going long on the biosphere’.

Last but not least, the novel overcomes the aforementioned challenges through various forms of genre hybridisation, through ‘indiscipline’ (Ursa) and through intermediality. ‘The new

weird’ integrates the strangeness of the actual world into otherwise realistic narratives, metabolising gothic techniques of defamiliarisation, mystical discourse, or fragments of scientific findings. As for genres, the new weird fiction manifests areas of overlap with speculative fiction, science fiction, gothic literature, and, more recently, eco-horror (ecological horror fiction) or cli-fi (climate fiction). It is a mode of literature that allows the transgression of boundaries, of the limits of the body through various monstrosities, of Euclidean space through various impossible spaces, of the natural order through the inexplicable (Luckhurst). Likewise, the new weird fiction uses the traditional techniques of weird literature, which resist the Enlightenment ambition of self-determination and knowledge, while keeping a place for the ‘unknown’; but in the new weird fiction, periodised in literary history as beginning in 2003, the radical otherness, the ‘alien’ element, produces horror only initially, and this feeling tends to turn into fascination and an expanded perception, following a religious logic of the ‘mysterium tremendum et fascinans’.

The ability of the new weird to integrate multiple forms and discourses in the exploration of liminal events, especially beyond dystopia (horror) and utopia (pleasure), is why I consider it one of the most productive forms of the novel in the Anthropocene. Moreover, through the aesthetic category of the uncanny, fundamental questions can be explored in the Anthropocene: who is acting, what is the nature of this agent, and in particular the absence-presence paradox of a diffuse danger. The problem with hyperobjects like the Anthropocene or ‘climate change’ is precisely that both its causes and its effects are unevenly distributed and nonlinear. In other cases, the novel recovers pre-modern, mythical forms, as in Doris Lessing’s novel *Mitra* (2007).

The novel not only resists but is a real inflection field that can enter into dialogue with other media. Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun* (2021) proposes the radically nonhuman

perspective of an artificial intelligence, which enters into dialogue with Ian Cheng's immersive narrative installation *Life After BOB* (2023) through the idea of 'programming'. *The Southern Reach* (2014-2024), Jeff VanderMeer's series of novels, enters into dialogue with art installations and fashion studies explored in *Out of Stock*. It is significant how fiction in the Anthropocene either overrides technological possibility to reveal patterns of perception that transcend human experience, or exacerbates it to the same end.

The thesis explores how the hypercontemporary Anglophone novel reinterprets the realities of an age in which ecological and epistemic collapse challenge traditional structures of narrative. Through speculative fabulations, spectral realism, and nonlinear narrative structures, the novels of the metacritical Anthropocene are 'capacious' (Le Guin) enough to illustrate the complexities of the era.

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