

Textes et contextes

ISSN : 1961-991X

: Université Bourgogne Europe

20-2 | 2025

L(es) invisible(s) dans les arts et le cinéma

John L. Hennessey (dir.), *History and Speculative Fiction*

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PREO

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John L. Hennessey (dir.), *History and Speculative Fiction*, Cham, Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024, 295 p., ISBN: 978-3-031-42234-8, <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/978-3-031-42235-5.pdf>.

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- 1 The concept of concurrences was developed by Gunlög Fur, a Swedish professor in the Department of Cultural Sciences at Linnaeus University. Her research had been mainly focused on Native Americans, but in the last years, she oriented her courses toward histories and the rights of indigenous populations, American history, colonialism and questions of gender and sexuality, in cooperation with professors from various disciplines. This combination of fields and perspectives of history illustrates the way “concurrences” may be used. *History and Speculative Fiction* offers another example of this concept based on the reference “to disparate spheres of existence and meaning that are interlinked but do not necessarily overlap and are not organized hierarchically” (Fur *et al.*: 54).
 - 2 The project was conducted by its editor John L. Hennessey, an associate Professor of the History of Ideas and Sciences at Lund University, and published in 2024 by Springer Nature.
 - 3 The experts who contributed to the collection work in the fields of history, or literary or cultural studies. What they have in common is

their focal point on non-occidental cultures, visions and fictions. The wider objective behind this book might also be to invite scholars to re-evaluate dominant discourses and their producers. In his introduction, Hennessey presents the reader with a series of questions about humanity, historical and fictional productions, social debate and the prediction of the future. It is established from the beginning that the study brings no answers but proposes an opening on how speculative fiction and history can be used to serve the same purpose: envisioning and understanding the past, the present and the future.

- 4 As explained by Hennessey in the introduction: “Concurrences aims therefore to complicate our view of the world by bringing in multiple perspectives, while not falling victim to either absolute relativism or conceiving of these meetings on an idealistic plane outside of real-life power differentials on the one hand, or oversimplified, stereotypical, or Manichean views of cultural difference on the other” (4). *History and Speculative Fiction* invites us to a new perception of the social sciences and encourages a dialogue between the various fields of research it encompasses. The point is to study spheres of knowledge defined as different and incompatible, rejecting binarity in the process of academic research. The various contributors aim at reducing the distance between the study of speculative fiction and history, excluding the construction of a hierarchal order when they are employed simultaneously. They consider that both are works of imagination and projection in space and time. This book shows how helpful it is for historians to study historical discourse through a speculative and fictional point of view and how, for scholars in literary and visual spheres, an historical angle can be useful when working on speculative fiction.
- 5 The book offers an overview of what the notion of concurrences means, as well as suggesting ways of applying it to speculative material. I use the word “material” because the primary resources under study are both movies and fictional texts, from different countries, genres and periods. As the genre of speculative fiction is hard to define, it is its creative potential, but nonetheless reliable, aspect that is central in this study as underlined by Hennessey: “In speculative fiction [...] the fantastic elements form a crucial part of the plot and its raison d’être, making it perhaps a more serious (though not always

less fun) type of fiction.” (10). The reading of this essay evinces how speculative fiction echoes the history and the sociological and political environment of the real world, rather than focusing on the borders between those fields.

- 6 The format of this book makes it more of an introduction than a complete analysis of the subject; independently, each chapter remains rather general and in a few of them, the summary of the studied fictional work dominates over its analysis. However, the variety of media and angles of reasoning widens the target audience, while “th[e] volume provides a robust opening to a serious discussion of [many] questions” (Hennessey 2) exposed in the introduction. The composition of the book remains pertinent as it is a series of examples of how the principles of concurrences can be used. It is interesting for scholars whose research focuses on a reconsideration of non-human elements, marginalised populations (people considered as a “subsection” of society because of their race or their gender), and fiction or historical discourses involving these. In fact, since the need to “re-write” and revise history under the prism of “dominated” beings has increased in popularity in the scientific sphere, the principles of “concurrences” appear as a pertinent set of methodological tools, as this book manifests.
- 7 The study is composed of thirteen chapters, each of them written by a different contributor, including doctoral students, professors and senior lecturers. The fourteenth chapter is a short story by the writer David Belden, who holds a degree in history and sociology. The book is divided into four parts, based on four different themes and subjects often found in speculative fiction.
- 8 The first part broaches the theme of colonial and post-colonial context and creations, and how speculative fiction plays with the criticism of the historical figure and the so-called power of “Whiteness”. The five chapters composing the section deal with the issue of the oppression and domination imposed by the Europeans and their “conqueror” figures on other civilisations and on Nature. Through different examples, such as Ursula K. Le Guin’s novels, *Interstellar*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* or collections of written South Asian stories from the 16th to the 20th centuries, the authors show that works classified as “speculative fiction” often deal with colonial-

ism as well as its present and future impact on society. In her chapter, Lahti demonstrates it well through the analysis of two space opera movies whose topic is the colonisation of outer space following environmental crisis on earth. In both movies, the “original pioneer spirit” is reinforced and idealised: “[...] the solution it actually offers is more settler colonization. Environmental crisis is just another obstacle for the settlers to overcome without questioning their actions as settlers” (Lahti: 66). So, by supplementing their reading with tools borrowed from the field of history, the authors argue that interdisciplinary analysis is necessary. Furthermore, as they stress the obvious historical influence on speculative fiction, in which alternative timelines and spaces are created, this section of the book helps the reader to grasp the sociological aspect of fiction. The point is to show that studying speculative fiction and history in combination in the post-colonial context highlights the importance of looking at the same past but from various points of view and can serve to challenge white domination in the cultural and historical discourse.

- 9 The second part studies the impact of the context upon a work of fiction and shows that “alternative” is not synonymous with unreliability. This part shows that alternative fictions are the reflection of the society they are created in, both its product and critical about it, taking into account the fact that the criticism is itself guided by its environment (sociological changes, new policies and consumers’ demands). The influence of social changes, for example the quota rules or scientific discoveries, proves how close reality and speculative reality can be in the production of fictions. The three chapters of the section demonstrate the extent to which fiction is a mirror of society and, in some cases, responds to the needs of its audience. It can mean, for example, the need to create an alternative past but without being totally inaccurate in its content. It is pointed out by Piia K. Posti, whose chapter deals with the analysis of the TV series *Bridgerton* as a speculative romance and an example of alternate history because of the integration of Black actors in the cast of its representation of nineteenth-century British aristocracy. In favour of concurrences, the contributors of this section invite us to study corpuses with tools from various fields of research in a balanced way. Alternative fictions do not claim to present a better version of the world, but they propose a new version of what we know, which in-

vites the audience to reflect upon their reality. Through the reading of Chiang's short stories Hennessey defines counterphysical literature. It is a subcategory of the speculative genre with which Chiang creates an alternative but scientifically correct set of "physical rules", based on the established physical laws of our reality. Hennessey argues that, "Like counterfactual literature, the characters in counterphysical literature generally do not understand or notice that something about their universe is 'wrong' or 'unnatural,' allowing the reader to speculate on how life might otherwise be or have been" (153).

- 10 The third part is centred on the framework of the concept of "humanity". Here, the principle of concurrences interestingly leads scholars to look at the same corpus, whether it includes fictional texts or movies, through the lens of the "Human Sciences", itself an interdisciplinary approach. This section invites us to consider the relationships of humans with other humans and humans with the non-human world at once, and how, in speculative fiction, both interactions echo each other. In her analysis of the South Korean movie *Chawu*, Höglund dissects both the relations between humans through the prism of gender study and the relations between humans and animals, by comparing the way male and female characters react to the wild boar which attacks people because "Humanity has upset the ecological balance, and punishment comes in the form of a gigantic wild boar with a taste for human flesh." (192). The author of this chapter engages with concurrences by putting in parallel the study of human society and its (dis)respect toward nature. She uses a speculative movie that blurs any Manichean vision by not specifying who is the real antagonist to exhibit her point. It demonstrates that the concept of concurrences encourages us to avoid establishing a hierarchical order in the field of interdisciplinary studies. The three contributors use examples from other countries and interrogate the dialogue between a population and its culture. As Trenter argues in her chapter about Sandemo's *The Legend Ice People* (saga sets in the history of Nordic people, featuring supernatural elements): "I consider the use of history as a remediation of pre-existing, fully recognizable representations of the past." (207). It puts forward the existence of other ways of "defining humanity" depending on the history of your nation. This section implicitly underlines the fact that history is not

neutral. It can be analysed through many cultural lenses and with the help of tools from various academic fields, including speculative fiction, which does not discredit the reliability of historical sources.

- 11 The fourth part is the shortest and the most surprising one, because it is composed of a chapter exposing academic research and of a short story. Its format illustrates the method of concurrences: the same subject is treated through a scientific analysis and a text of fiction, and neither of them is presented as more significant than the other in its way of dealing with the theme of the section. This section is based on the most well-known aspect of speculative fiction: the idea of creating the future in order to correct the present. The short story takes place in a speculative future and blurs the boundary between what is a creation (fiction) and what is real (history). It also questions the relation to the past, for a better present and future, which indeed responds to the previous chapter of the section. The academic chapter studies several speculative works—to name only a few, the animated movie *WALL-E*, Banksy's artwork named *Dismaland*, the movies *Children of Men* and *Valerian*. All these are examples of different nature but all are set in the future and invite the audience to think about their own reality. To exemplify her aim, Loftsdóttir reduces her analysis to the concern of the “refugee crisis” and how it is treated and speculated about in the fictions she uses as a corpus, because

“by locating their narratives as taking place in the future, authors manage to move beyond dull party-political debates into the core of the issues at stake. The future or alien setting can thus more be imagined as a backdrop—or ‘window dressing’ in Sardar’s (2002) words—making it easier in some sense to insert charged political issues into popular discourse.” (253).

- 12 However, the point of the author is to encourage scholars to look at the origins of concepts and terms used to define current crisis as well as those used to imagine the future of our world. This section reveals the usefulness of concurrences as a methodological tool when dealing with the anticipation of the future either in the field of history or when analysing speculative fiction. In fact, the future needs to be imagined but its speculation must be based on what already happened to be plausible.

- 13 The point of the whole analysis is to show that speculative fiction cannot be detached from its surroundings; no alternative reality can be well composed if it is not based on something real. However, the book also aims at showing that this relation is not one-sided. As history can be incorporated in the study of fiction, fiction can be a useful corpus to historical analysis. After reading this book, scholars may want to look differently at speculative fiction, and be more tempted to adopt the concept of concurrences in their research.

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