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Moorcock maintains that imaginative literature is crucial to building a just society. Scorning “pseudo-literary Tolkienoid pomposities,” Moorcock deplores the facile nostalgia pervading popular fiction. Believing that only socially engaged literature has value, Moorcock rejects fiction that turns inward to explore one’s social class and individual psyche. He celebrates Ballard’s Drowned World (1962), the first novel predicting climate change: “We write such books not because we are convinced they describe the future, but because we hope they do not.” Imaginative literature should warn us of “disasters which we, as voters and citizens, can perhaps avoid” (236). Moorcock praises science fiction writers who are risk-takers and visionaries. As editor of New Worlds, Moorcock sought “fiction which . . . would address the specific conditions of post-second world war society” (125).

Because Moorcock is so prolific and multi-faceted, readers and listeners, casual and scholarly, are likely to regard Moorcock as the blind man did the elephant. One sees a “rope” (heroic fantasies of Elric), another a “wall” (Jerry Cornelius novels), and yet another a “pillar” (Moorcock’s performances with the rock band, Hawkwind). The nonfiction writings of London Peculiar, however, powerfully convey that the glue that holds together these varied genres is Moorcock’s empathy with the poor and marginalized. Engagingly written, astute about literature and politics, Moorcock’s London Peculiar is suitable for both university and public libraries.

Liminality in Fantastic Fiction: A Poststructuralist Approach

Leon Marvell


Order option(s): Paperback

A HANDY CONCEPT, the liminal. It appears to be multi-form, inter- and extra-temporal, and able to stand in at a moment’s notice for seemingly any unusual literary trope that one can imagine. At least, that is what the author seems to have essayed in this headlong trip through and around this (dis)organising centre of an idea.

Klapcsík begins his analysis in an uncontroversial manner: he outlines the origins of the term in the anthropological theories of Victor Turner, who had in turn drawn upon Arnold von Gennep’s ideas about the “rite of passage.” This latter consists of three distinct phases: separation, liminality and re-incorporation. Turner’s anthropology made much of the “no man’s land” of the liminal phase, and Klapcsík morphs the liminal into a kind of meta-machine with a large set of protean functionings within his selected texts. Rather disconcertingly, one finds oneself loathe to even try and encapsulate the term after reading this book; one feels Klapcsík standing behind intoning, “You haven’t understood it at all!”

A handy concept too, the postmodern. It is used to characterise all the texts that Klapcsík examines, and, at least as far as Klapcsík is concerned, it appears indistinguishable from post-structuralism. The heuristic behind this strange conflation is never explained or justified by the author, and perhaps that is as well for his thesis, as various poststructuralist moves and gambits are used throughout to characterise his discovery of “liminality” in the works of Agatha Christie (yes, you read that right), Neil Gaiman, Stanislaw Lem and Philip K. Dick.

Deleuze, Nietzsche, Stanley Fish, Paul de Man, Foucault, Michel de Certeau and Derrida also appear within the first twenty pages or so of his introduction to the book, and their contributions to his reconceptualization of liminality are briefly outlined. Baudrillard also gets a look in, of course. And just when one thought the menagerie of postmodernist/poststructuralist thinkers was complete, Todorov pops up, and, to a roaring round of applause, Lacan jumps out of the mirror!

Yes, I am being facetious, but not without reason. It is beyond the brief of this review to examine in depth the utility of his calling on this blessed host of authors, but the sheer number of “big names” and the brief quotations he adduces to justify their inclusion often comes across as little more than a spurious gesture towards authority. The repetitious appearance of these names across nearly every page of Klapcsík’s text also contributes to a sense of impatience with the author’s manner of presenting his ideas. One longs for extended passages of analysis in which a particular aspect of the liminal within a text is examined in depth, rather than every other paragraph being devoted to brief quotations from Derrida, de Man, Foucault et al, in an effort to justify Klapcsík’s ideas. This produces a stop-start reading ex-
perience that scholars accustomed to larger, more forceful passages of analysis may well find disconcerting.

Occasionally this constant gesturing towards authorities and the utilisation of short quotations to forward his argument goes horribly awry. He states that “we need to go beyond…traditional forms of representation and…cyberspace brings forth new forms of space and representation.” He then quotes Baudrillard to back up this idea: “Today the scene and the mirror no longer exist; instead there is a screen and a network” (28). Apparently Klapcsik is oblivious to the fact that Baudrillard is making a point about the utility of psychoanalytical ideas (Freud’s primal “scene” and Lacan’s “mirror”) in the information age rather than commenting on new types of representation.

Klapcsik’s opening position is that, “liminality should be reinterpreted and diversified in accordance with the cultural change of postmodernism” (9). To briefly demonstrate the concordance of poststructuralist ideas with his readings of liminality in the postmodern Dick, Christie, Lem and Gaiman, Klapcsik looks to Derrida’s invention and use of the term difference as a paradigmatic case of the functioning of liminality is poststructuralist discourse. Derrida’s difference requires temporal and spatial slippages: hybrid, liminal phenomena, which are both inside and outside dialectics” (11). He quotes from Derrida’s Positions: “[The displacements of difference] inhabit philosophical opposition, resisting and disorganising it, but without ever constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of a speculative dialectics...Neither/nor, that is, simultaneously either or” (11). And thus Derridean difference is sucked into the vortex of Klapcsik’s metamorphic, postmodern liminality.

There are three distinct characteristics of liminality hypothesised by Klapcsik: firstly there is a “constant oscillation, crossing back and forth between social and cultural positions”; secondly we find a “space of continuous transference, a never ending narrative”; lastly liminality is “created by transgressions, or traversals, across evanescent, porous, indefinite, ambiguous, evasive borders” (14). Strange loops and metalepses abound in the texts Klapcsik examines, and Borges’s “The Circular Ruins,” beloved of postmodernists everywhere, raises its Janus head here as well, becoming an early example of the Klapcsik liminoid.

Klapcsik locates and explicates four aspects of liminality in the stories and novels he examines: cultural or institutional liminality; generic liminality (exemplified by “slipstream” literature, and Gaiman’s and Dick’s blending of genre norms and conventions, for example); narrative liminality (where there is the oscillation between perspectives, focal points and styles) and thematic liminality, which blurs the boundaries between self and Other, mechanical and human, the real and the virtual, for example.

A more traditional conception of the liminal is married to his idea of “oscillating” liminality when Klapcsik notes that the setting on a train in both Christie’s 4.50 From Paddington and Murder on the Orient Express represents a space wherein we witness the collapse of social hierarchies and the shuffling of social classes. He then goes on to assert, rather more tendentiously, that as Christie’s characters “wear masks to hide their real natures” we find here an example of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque,” where, just as on Christie’s Orient Express, there is a “suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions” (44). There is an ever so slight sleight-of-hand here (the equivalence of “social masks” and carnival masks) that enables him to get us to where he wants us to go—into the saturnalian side of Christie’s imagination—but I think we should be rightly suspicious of his means of conveyance.

His chapter on Neil Gaiman’s short stories examines Gaiman’s “generic liminality” in terms of the slippage between genre conventions and modalities, and also in terms of Gaiman’s “narrative liminality” where his pluralised perspectives “deny the reader the possibility of nominating, let alone maintaining, a privileged point-of-view” (55). We find in Gaiman’s work a “thematic liminality” as well, in that his texts more often than not play within the evanescent border between normative reality and the fantastic.

I doubt very much that I need to talk about Klapcsik’s conception of liminality in regards to his chapters on Dick and Lem — by now the use of his ideas in regards to their work should be so obvious that it would be both redundant and facile.

If one can forgive Klapcsik his occasional dubious equivalences—such as Benjamin’s flaneur being equivalent to Deleuze and Guattari’s nomad, and the latter’s conception of rhizomatic space being equivalent to “liminal” space—Klapcsik’s obvious enthusiasm for his project is oftentimes all that he needs to carry the reader along with his high-flying and sometimes eccentric analysis of liminal tropes. Where else would one read that Agatha Christie’s Mousetrap is equivalent (liminality-wise) to Wes Craven’s Scream?

Liminality in Fantastic Fiction is like a hydra-headed one trick pony: sure it is just the one trick, but it takes...
so many forms, and has so many surprising and unexpected variations. For scholars of science fiction and the fantastic Klápsík provides a synoptic overview of postmodern liminality, and whether one agrees with his readings of individual tropes or not, the sheer breadth of his interconnections is both fascinating and an inspiration for future research.

Murray Leinster: The Life and Works

Christopher Leslie


Order option(s): Paperback | Kindle

IT IS EASY TO MISS AT FIRST, but the reader of this new biography of William Fitzgerald Jenkins (better known by one of his pen names Murray Leinster) begins to suspect it is an inside story. Thoughts and words are attributed to “Will” without sources, private letters are quoted liberally, and information is said to be remembered as if it were coming from personal conversations; the text even includes Leinster’s fudge recipe. The scholar rightly asks where this information comes from. Then one realizes that the authors, Billee J. Stallings and Jo-An J. Evans, have the same first names as Leinster’s daughters. The suspicion turns out to be true: this is an insider’s view from Leinster’s two youngest daughters.

Stallings and Evans offer fans of the history of science fiction and scholars of the genre an opportunity to see what a science fiction family lived like. There are other notable inside glances—Isaac Asimov’s biographies come to mind—but the opportunity to see the growth of American science fiction through the eyes of an author’s family is much more rare. Stallings and Evans write in loving tones about their father’s opportunities and accomplishments in the field, and at the same time they demonstrate a thoughtful understanding of the development of the genre as seen through their father’s career. In spite of their affection of their father, however, they have created a relatively objective account that places Leinster into the category of hybrid inventor-writers who helped developed the genre in the twentieth century. As said by James Gunn in his (too) brief forward, Leinster was one of the most prolific authors of all time, with a career that spanned six decades in which he published 1,500 stories and nearly 100 books. His 1934 story “Sideways in Time” influenced the formula for the alternate history story to such a great extent that there is now a “Sideways” award for the genre. Leinster was also the inventor of a process for front projection, a kind of film special effect where actors are filmed before a film screen, which was used in the Dawn of Man sequence in 2001: A Space Odyssey.

Leinster was one of the first science fiction writers to be published in the “slicks” with his September 1949 story “Doomsday Deferred” in The Saturday Evening Post. Robert A. Heinlein had beat him by two years, but for Leinster, who had not started in the pulps, this was a return to the mainstream rather than a breakthrough into it. Stallings and Evans intimately tell the story of Leinster’s writing career, providing their readers with concrete details of creation of the genre. At the age of 19, he published his first story in H. L. Menken’s literary magazine The Smart Set. In a development reminiscent of John W. Campbell wanting to run two stories from Robert A. Heinlein in the same issue of Astounding, Leinster began using a second name when Menken was having trouble finding enough contributors. His mother’s maiden name was Murray, which he chose for his first name, and the last name was a bit of invented royalty. He associated his middle name, Fitzgerald, with the Duke of Leinster because he learned that the Fitzgeralds of Ireland were descended from him. Thus, Murray Leinster (which the biographers say is pronounced len-ster) was born. As Leinster began finding publications outside of Menken’s magazine, Menken asked him to reserve his real name for his best work in The Smart Set. By the time Hugo Gernsback established Amazing Stories in 1926, Leinster has published in Argosy, Short Stories, Clues, Telling Tales, and elsewhere. Gernsback republished “The Runaway Skyscraper” in his third issue.

Like Gernsback, Heinlein, Asimov, and other writers of the golden age, Leinster wrote from the perspective of an inventor. In the spring of 1942, Stallings and Evans explain, Leinster became involved in the war effort by becoming a senior publications editor for the newly-created Office of War Information (which lists him as Leinster, not Jenkins). Leinster had published a story in the 1931 issue of Astounding Stories “Morale,” that described an enemy who invades New Jersey and engages in psychological warfare to destroy the people’s morale. As Stallings and Evans note, this idea “moved from fiction to an actual current event” in World War II (87). As part of the war effort, in 1943, they report, he demon-