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Keen, Sober, and Smart: Review of Eric Otto's
*Green Speculations: Science Fiction and Transformative
Environmentalism*

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fantastical worlds than could be conveyed by sparklers attached to the backside of toy rocket ships” (xxi).

Where Jenkins is right in asserting the continued influence of 1950s television on popular culture, I would contest that digital effects technology is necessarily superior to older techniques in representing the future. While science fiction is often considered a visual genre, the power it has to make us dream of a brighter future lies in the ideas, not the images—the fact that these space rangers and explorers were out there among the stars was the powerful catalyst for childhood aspirations, not the sparkling toy rockets. An Epilogue, “Confessions of a *Commando Cody* Addict (or, How the Flying Suit Changed My Life)” by Gary Hughes, offers a fan perspective on why *Radar Men from the Moon* (1952) attracted him as a child and still holds him in thrall as an adult. Making videos that honor his childhood hero, Commando Cody, and favorite sf series, is a typical fan practice and offers a modern take on how these series still motivate audiences to explore their own creativity and express their passion for television.

From nostalgic views of space adventure to the cultural importance of 1950s sf TV series, Miller and Van Riper’s anthology is an informative read and a much-needed work on an often-overlooked period in television history. Understanding the cultural impact of these series—and the symbols of heroism and Americana contained within them—is an important step in learning why we care at all about sf media and the affective relationship we share with the genre. Yet such a wide-ranging examination of the subject (14 chapters) often concentrates too much on the general and not enough on the particular. While the volume suggests that fans are central to its overall thesis, examples of fan practices and productivity rarely appear. This collection talks about audiences and the consumption of “Rocketman” TV series but lacks an appreciation of fandom and the fan culture surrounding these kinds of television texts. I agree with Jenkins’s closing remark in his Foreword, “We still have much to learn from the era of the Rocketman” (xxii), and this collection provides the reader with a wonderful education. With a little more work, however, on the contemporary fan and how “Rocketman” TV series inform sf fandom and fan culture today (in the vein of Hughes’s Epilogue), it could have taught us so much more.—**Lincoln Geraghty, University of Portsmouth**

Keen, Sober, and Smart. Eric C. Otto. *Green Speculations: Science Fiction and Transformative Environmentalism*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2012. x + 152 pp. \$44.95 hc.

“If you go home, turn on the laptop, the TV,” Kim Stanley Robinson told the *Guardian* in 2009, “almost anything could be reported. The world has become a science fiction novel, everything’s changing so quickly. Science fiction turns out to be the realism of our time, which is very satisfying.” For many people I suspect that *satisfying* registers a very specific brand of satisfaction, something like the sense of “interesting” in that famous Chinese curse—or the bitter joy Cassandra takes, perhaps, in having at least been right about everything all along. From catastrophic oil spills to flooded cities to

apocalyptic winter superstorms, the world seems every day to become more and more like some dire sf film of the 1960s or 1970s, a cautionary tale about all the horrible things that will happen to us if we fail to change our ways in time.

In his book *Green Speculations: Science Fiction and Transformative Environmentalism*, Eric C. Otto taps into this sense that the immediacy and *strangeness* of real-life environmental crisis lends new urgency to the writing and study of environmental sf. Despite a still-lingering reputation for unseriousness, Otto argues, sf can successfully intervene in wider discourses around the environment because it not only “reflects” and “sometimes prefigures” our new reality of planetary ecological threat, but “in its finest moments theorizes transformative environmentalism and its assorted targets of criticism” (4-5). Otto further argues that the cognitive work required to read and write sf—estrangement, extrapolation, and world-building—mirrors the mental labor necessary for both documentary environmental writing and ecologically infused cultural critique. Via Patrick Murphy’s claim that “extrapolation emphasizes that the present and the future are interconnected,” (qtd. 11), Otto’s book shows how, in an age of ecological crisis, the border separating “realist” environmental writing from sf becomes ever more porous.

The “transformative environmentalism” of Otto’s title refers to that subgenre of radical, subversive, politically leftist ecological writing that is not content to leave science in the laboratory but seeks actively to alter the social conditions of the material world and our ingrained mental habits. The patron saint of transformative environmentalism is Rachel Carson, whose work metonymically stands in on page one of *Green Speculations* for the entire canon—and who, famously, began her own classic work, *Silent Spring* (1962), not with facts or figures but with a science-fictional “Fable for Tomorrow.” The writers Otto takes up in *Green Speculations* typically exhibit a similar desire to transform the conditions of the world through the interplay of fact and fancy, choosing a generally fictional register for their work instead of Carson’s generally nonfictional one. Accordingly, *Green Speculations* spends quite a bit of time investigating the familiar ground of utopia and dystopia that has been so constitutive of sf studies since the 1970s. Among Otto’s many keen observations here is his recognition of the disturbing character of so much ecotopian fantasy: its willingness to take up right-wing framings of overpopulation, excess, waste, and austerity in the name of environmental rationality and desperate bids to save the future. In environmental discourse, he suggests, dystopia turns out to be the far richer and far more *trustworthy* category of the imagination, as dystopia (as exemplified by the ecological disaster novels of John Brunner) can articulate both the coming apocalyptic disasters we are bringing down upon our heads and the traumatized, anti-utopian potential for “misanthropic aggression” of so much ecological activism. Dystopia, not utopia, may plot the safer course between Scylla and Charybdis.

A similarly dialectical inversion takes place around the sense of deep ecology and embeddedness-in-the-world that characterizes so much environmental sf. Embeddedness, Otto argues, is in many ways the crucial antidote to capitalism’s refusal to acknowledge the ultimate necessity of nature—and yet excess fidelity

to embeddedness risks generating more dystopian misanthropy, the suspicion that the world might just be better off without us altogether. Reading this theoretical conundrum through the Fremens of Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), Otto finds that the both/and of Arrakis offers a correction to deep ecology that allows it to break free of this paralyzing internal contradiction. "Perhaps to acknowledge and live today our ecological embeddedness is to acknowledge and live *Dune's* implicit, more sobering lesson: we are a part of the bee *and* the GMO crop, the water cycle *and* the faucet, the forest *and* the lumber, the ocean *and* the oil" (43). Human beings exist precariously between radically nonhuman nature and radically unnatural technological artifice—and perhaps better than any other literary genre, sf has at hand the terms and tools necessary for thinking about how to live in this strange gap.

Chapter four, on ecosocialism, takes up most directly the political commitment to anticapitalism that the earlier discussions in the book had generally assumed implicitly, with savvy readings of Fredrick Pohl and C.M. Kornbluth's *The Space Merchants* (1953), Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Word for World Is Forest* (1972), and Kim Stanley Robinson's *MARS TRILOGY* (1993-96). Here *Green Speculations* is at its most radical—and indeed at its most transformative—seeking to find in science fiction some strategy for ending capitalism and thereby saving the world (a tall order!). And here the dialectical inversion of the priority of utopia and dystopia discussed above inverts a second time; Otto desires in the end some positive model for what ecotopia might look like after all. He finds it in Robinson's *MARS TRILOGY*, particularly in the books' articulation of an alternative, ecologically rational economics and its celebration of rational, democratic deliberation as a workable means to get there. In this regard *Green Speculations* frames its final intervention in "transformative ecology" in humanistic terms that turn out, unexpectedly, to be quite traditionally liberal. The fantastic speculations and rigorous scientific extrapolations of sf, the book ultimately argues, can heighten our appreciation of environmental crisis in order to motivate rational action in the present on behalf of the future; in essence, sf can make us better people, better citizens.

Of course, we should not go too far overboard with this: "I do not suppose," Otto concedes, "that the subgenre itself will save the world." Not in itself. But what environmental sf *can* do, *Green Speculations* insists, is to contribute to the growing canon of fictional and nonfictional environmental writing that is already generating "tools for thinking and building a new way forward," and to help mobilize a collective desire for needed change in the face of neoliberal capitalism's violent instinct for self-preservation at any cost (126). Sober and smart, *Green Speculations* nonetheless sounds an alarm. In a world looking more and more like some dark, depressing science fiction, and in a public sphere casting about for ways to somehow process this terrifying new reality, our expertise as critics is required.—Gerry Canavan, Marquette University

Whimsical Avant-Garde Oddball. Paul Scheerbart. *Lesabéndio*. Trans. Christina Svendsen. Cambridge, MA: Wakefield, 2012. xv +257 pp. \$15.95 pbk.