

ESTERINO ADAMI, FRANCESCA BELLINO  
AND ALESSANDRO MENGOZZI

OTHER WORLDS  
AND THE NARRATIVE  
CONSTRUCTION  
OF OTHERNESS

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# OTHER WORLDS AND THE NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF OTHERNESS

ESTERINO ADAMI, FRANCESCA BELLINO  
AND ALESSANDRO MENGOLZI<sup>1</sup>

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The papers collected in this volume are concerned with the explorations of science fiction and, more generally, the representation of otherness through the narrative construction of fantastic, imaginary, appalling or attractive places, stories and figures. The scope of the collected papers is deliberately open-ended and broad, since they aim to traverse, tackle, compare and contrast a constellation of narrative discourses, texts, and authors in various cultures, often observed in a dialogic relationship between past and present, local and global variables, native and alien models.

This volume ambitiously gathers contributions from Italian scholars working in a variety of disciplines ranging from Indian cultures to Arabic literature and film studies, stylistics in English-language fiction and postcolonial authors to Semitic and Classical philology, and it is therefore grounded upon different methodological perspectives and theoretical frameworks. Interdisciplinarity spreads across the papers, conceived as case studies, and affects approaches and standpoints of every contributor, since the multidimensionality and complexity of the objects of investigation trigger the adoption of various methodologies and indeed compel scholars to reflect on methodology, interpretative paradigms and ideological frameworks.

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1 The idea of collecting these contributions in a volume arose from a conference held at the University of Turin (May 13, 2014) and entitled “Luoghi e Creature d’Oriente: dal fantastico alla fantascienza”. The editors express their gratitude to all those who attended and contributed to it, especially Carlo Pagetti, whose outstanding studies on fantasy and science fiction deeply inspired the very idea of the conference.

Many of the genres taken into account – science fiction, comic books, oral myths, folk-tales, heroic narratives – superficially appear to be simple, even naïf or marginal, representing a generic category of the so-called ‘popular culture’, but in reality they partake of cultural complexities in transit between tradition and (post)modernity. In challenging canons and readers, and implicitly suggesting other paths of narrative transformation and elaboration, for example with the same themes and characters across genre boundaries, from literature to cinema, from mythology to graphic novels, these narratives actually appropriate modalities and devices that undergo a process of revision to envisage thorny cultural questions.

Narratives of otherness are addressed with the whole methodological armamentarium of cultural studies and beyond, including history, philology, literature, semiotics and of course narratology. Narratives are read and presented as cultural products of, or, in reaction to specific historical contexts: the gradual formation and diffusion of complex text networks in late-antique, medieval and early modern Asian empires, the confluence of Buddhism, Marxism, Socialism and Gandhism at the beginning of the 20th century in India, the massive Chinese immigration to England and the USA, the diffusion of French colonial power in North-Africa, the reception and original re-working of science fiction in Arabic literature during the second half of the 20th century, episodes of collective panics in concomitance with political changes in early-1960’s Tanzania and Zanzibar, the first crisis of Nasserism around the end of the Sixties and the arising of an oppressive and repressive regime in Egypt.

The macro-theme of East and West confrontation, in both directions, generates a series of interrelated tropes, topics and features, that cumulatively design a red thread throughout the papers. Freely moving within the ideological and cultural paradigm of postcolonial studies, going beyond or explicitly rejecting Said’s *Orientalism* (1st ed. 1978), contributors examine the alleged East-West dichotomy with a critical gaze, both within and across cultures: thus not only the construction of the “Other” as a kind of clichéd bearer of otherness, exotic strangeness, and

even threat – see, e.g., the Yellow peril and its medieval Mongol forerunner, the risks of miscegenation and hybridisation, the Swahili sex-maniac monster and other deadly images associated with political power and alienation, returning dead women, hard-to-exorcize demons, the Indians as beasts in the Alexander Romance, and the time-honoured ghoulish character of Ra's al-Ghūl in modern Batman adventures – but also as the reshaping of Western symbols from what a Western-centric perspective may consider the world's peripheries.

As an alternative to the Greenwich-centred world map, Hindi science fiction by Rāhul Sāmkrityāyan envisages a global geopolitical map centred on a small-size capital city in Brazil, temporary residence for functionaries and nomadic global politicians. An Asian rather than Graeco-Mediterranean axis is proposed to describe the territory in which inclusive works such as the Alexander Romance enjoyed immense popularity, creating a literary space for the negotiation between global and local cultural identities.

Stereotype is one of the mechanisms through which different narratives operate. The outlandish creatures, characters, and places at first sight appear to be connoted as unoriginal, frozen and even trite, but in reality they work as means for exploring a variety of discourses by speculating on other wor(l)ds, and to achieve such a goal they often rely on intertextuality and hybridity, two key paradigms that reverberate through various genres.

Intertextuality here concerns the capacity of texts and stories to link bridges with other references and domains. The linguistic, literary and cultural materials analysed in the various papers establish connections between traditions, shuttling between times and spaces, so that it is possible to imagine the irruption of fantasy as a way to obliterate history in 1960's Egypt, utopian or dystopian places in the Indian subcontinent, the menace of the East in terms of racialised figures at the beginning of the 20th century in the West, or ghostly beliefs from ancient Greece to the Raj period and contemporary Indian cinema.

Hybridity on the other hand triggers a strategy of transformation that affects both styles and contents. The expressive modalities

and languages of Asian and African science fiction and Fantasy in fact stem from and blend together a wealth of traditions, imageries and stories. Thanks to them fiends of antiquity surface from Victorian ghost literature in the works of M.R. James, or the Tanzanian demon Popobawa leaves fiction and as shared belief enters the realm of propaganda, news and eventually history. Interestingly, hybridity also turns out to be a recurring token as it thematically impacts body discourse with monstrosity as a constant feature for the beings and creatures portrayed in this type of text.

From a quasi-canonical narratological perspective, Eastern characters play the roles of villains in Western narratives, complying with a rather predictable rule of polar contraposition: the Other is a dangerous enemy. However, Ra's al-Ghūl becomes the Eastern anti-hero of American comics only after or perhaps because he has been the internal pagan enemy of Islam or the external colonial invader in Arabic popular epic. Read through the programmatically universal lens of Jungian psychoanalysis, the super-villain spirit Popobawa may be seen as an African character that embodies "the uncanny" and transposes African fears in the domains of Swahili fiction, in literature and movie production.

Contributions are arranged in four main sections that form a kind of thematic tour. The first section (*Other Spaces, New Worlds*) deals with Hindi and Arabic science fiction. A Hindi author narrates a socio-political utopian model of universal modernity, alternative to imported socialism and capitalism and Indian nationalism. Through science fiction, Arab authors create ideal or fearful cities and societies, in the desert or under the sea, and struggle to imagine an original modern future, using native traditions and foreign models. The second section (*Constructing Forms of Otherness*) analyses the narrative and psychological mechanisms that give form to a stereotype or archetypal image of the threatening Other. The third section (*(Re)Shaping Style(s), Language(s) and Discourse(s) of Otherness*) is centred on the idea of language as a tool to build up styles, genres and texts, and



literature as an escape from disappointing history and a cross-cultural wandering space of narrative ghosts. The fourth section (*Circulating Fearful Otherness*) tests the limits and heuristic potential of a philological approach in reconstructing the wide circulation of motifs and characters from antiquity to (post-)modernity.