NONFICTION REVIEWS

Theory for the World to Come: Speculative Fiction and Apocalyptic Anthropology, by Matthew J. Wolf-Meyer

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Apocalypse is never singular, but multiple. This is “Wyndham’s rule,” the main premise with which Matthew J. Wolf-Meyer opens Theory for the World to Come. Speculative Fiction and Apocalyptic Anthropology (the title of the first chapter and its contents detail what Wolf-Meyer means by the term), an interesting and thought-provoking study of the future and the conditions of possibility that make it happen.

This compact volume of just over 100 pages is, despite its brevity, packed to the brim with contingent and at times even radical ideas on topics as widespread as catastrophe, city planning, race, human nature, and politics. This interest in seemingly disconnected topics also extends to Wolf-Meyer’s cross-disciplinary methodology, which groups speculative fiction, personal diaries, and social theory in a common effort to interrogate the many possible dimensions of our imagination about the future.

The future—and its limits—are exactly what lie at the heart of this book: the “world to come,” with all its problematic folds and inexplicable weirdness. How can we trace back the way our world has come to be, and understand its temporality as a complex continuum of historical variables? How can we develop new ways of comprehending what’s going to happen in the next few centuries if we haven’t yet absorbed the many undetermined possibilities of our present? And, more importantly, how can we deal with the idea of an “end” to what we’ve built? Can we change it, or should we resign ourselves to impending doom? These and other questions lead Wolf-Meyer to explore the ways in which twentieth and twenty-first century speculative fiction—in both literature and film—have advanced different social theories that provide us with usually unorthodox as well as revealing answers about our past, present, and future.

The structure of the book follows a straightforward premise: if the threat of annihilation looms on the horizon, as Wyndham’s rule seems to suggest, then speculative fiction must address this notion and produce social theories relevant for a future at risk of never materializing. From this standpoint, the author identifies three different forms of narratological social theory under the guise of “future historiography” (19): extrapolation, intensification, and mutation. These
modalities manifest themselves as narrative or even thematic devices designed to propel the conversation about the future beyond its commonly agreed limits and to advance discussion on alternative ways of portraying what’s to come. Accordingly, each chapter explores different fictions and ways of employing future historiography to produce coherent and relevant social theories.

The first three chapters after the introduction (“Detroit Diaries, 1992-1999,” “White Futures and Visceral Presents: Robocop and P-Funk,” and “The Revolutionary Horizons of Labor and Automation: Blue Collar and Player Piano”) deal with the idea of “intensification” (19), analyzing futures in which present issues are not really resolved, but rather expanded on, both in significance as well as spatial and social presence.

Images Wolf-Meyer brings forward during these first few pages include Robocop’s (1987) ultra-violence as an expression of repressed humanity and P-Funk’s music as an attempt to recover such lost humanity during the 80s; Player Piano’s (1952) representation of automation as a reflection on the meaning of labor, and Detroit as a city of technological promises degraded into a racially segregated sprawl. Each chapter is short and direct, not wasting any time to get to the main topics the author seeks to put into the spotlight: race politics, human nature, and the possibilities of automation in a posthuman age.

The following two chapters (“California Diaries, 2008-2015,” and “Extrapolating Neoliberalism in the Western Frontier: Octavia Butler’s Parables”) focus on extrapolation as a narrative device employed to represent present problems in scenarios radically different from our own. In his “California Diaries,” Wolf-Meyer reflects upon how living—and, particularly, buying a house—in California forced him to accept the fragility and indeterminacy of a future “so precarious, so subject to change” (53), where catastrophe is always around the corner, while his study of Octavia Butler’s work makes some interesting points about the inner logic of capitalism and its ever-consuming nature, revealed through extrapolation and a rather fascinating proclivity towards devastation and crisis, something the author also finds a characteristic feature of life in California.

The final three chapters of the books (“New York Diaries, 2015-2018,” “The Nihilism of Deep Time: Man after Man and After,” and “Mutating Temporalities: Slipstream Christopher Columbus”) deal with mutation, or the speculative expression of change as a chronological and temporal construct. This section opens with the “New York Diaries,” in which the author explores life in a secluded town where the future “never seems to come” (72), thus rendering thinking and worrying about it as unnecessary exercises in frustration.

This notion of an unmanifested future, precluded from experience, is also present in his study of “deep time” (82), which posits that in the larger scheme of things, human existence and humanity’s self-made so-called apocalypse, is not only circumstantial, but irrelevant altogether. This pessimistic conviction is then contested in the final chapter of the book, which turns its attention to the possibility of alternative futures, or “mutant temporalities” (91) that would allow,
at least in theory, for possible “ways out” (100) of the unavoidable apocalypse that we, as humans, seem so stubbornly obsessed with bringing about.

In the end, this is indeed a book about the future and the many natural and artificial threats it faces; but it’s also a deep and well-researched study on the expression of hope through speculative fiction and social theory during the last fifty years. Through his analyses and account of personal experiences, Wolf-Meyer provides a panoramic view of the many attitudes towards the future we have developed over time: Should we fear it? Should we try to stop it? Escape it? Transform it? The possibilities are numerous, and if there’s something to be taken from this book, it is the idea that an undetermined future is not necessarily a bad one. Indeterminacy means possibility, and possibility means opportunity for change. For Wolf-Meyer, this is the conviction that motivates speculative fiction to represent different scenarios and outcomes to problems we, today, might see as simply insurmountable. It also helps us to understand the trends that have brought us to where we are and, ideally, to try to remediate them before it’s too late, because any theory for the world to come should at least address our experience with time and space and project it beyond our imagination into—if not better, at least different—ways of experiencing reality.

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