

# **The Real Aftermath**

How COVID-19 Changed the Way Science  
Fiction is Conceived, Read, and Interpreted

Edited by  
**Riccardo Retez**

**Series in Literary Studies**



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# Table of Contents

	<b>Foreword</b>	v
	Vincenzo Pernice <i>University of Milan, Italy</i>	
	<b>Introduction</b>	vii
	<b>Part One - The Cultural Aftermath</b>	1
Chapter 1	<b>The Role of Science Fiction in Shaping our Understanding of Global Crises</b>	3
	Syed Danish Bukhari <i>Sir Syed Case Institute of Technology, Islamabad, Pakistan</i>	
Chapter 2	<b>Reconstructing the Pogrom-cum-Pandemic in Indian Science Fiction</b>	19
	Annika McPherson <i>University of Augsburg, Germany</i>	
Chapter 3	<b>Reshaping Realities in Ouedraogo Mculough's <i>The Echoes of Kimbali</i>: Transformative Impact of COVID-19 on African Science Fiction</b>	37
	Alfred Ndi <i>The University of Bamenda, Republic of Cameroon</i>	
	<b>Part Two - The Interactive Aftermath</b>	55
Chapter 4	<b><i>Death Stranding</i>: The Scorched Earth of Contemporary Video Gaming</b>	57
	Luca Miranda <i>IULM University of Milan, Italy</i>	
Chapter 5	<b><i>The Last of Us</i> and <i>Silo</i>: Two Gloomy Moments of Science Fiction in the Context of Covid and Post-Covid Aftermath as a Futurist Pandemic Global Scenery</b>	73
	Paulo Quadros <i>University of São Paulo, Brazil</i>	

Chapter 6	<b>Facing the Sixth Extinction: Pandemic and Mass Extinction in Dystopian Video Games</b>	81
	Tijana Rupcic <i>Central European University, Vienna, Austria</i>	
	<b>Part Three - The Visual Aftermath</b>	101
Chapter 7	<b>NOPE - How to Refuse the Cannibalistic Culture of the Spectacle</b>	103
	Emily Margaret FitzGerald <i>Utah Tech University, Utah, US</i>	
Chapter 8	<b>In the Ruins of Cosmopolitanism: Re-reading Cixin Liu and Song Han in the Post-COVID Age</b>	123
	Luo Tianren <i>Fudan University, China</i> Wang Xing <i>Renmin University of China</i>	
	<b>About the Authors</b>	141
	<b>Glossary</b>	145

# Foreword

Vincenzo Pernice

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Science fiction calls, the pandemic responds. When the world began to realize the COVID-19 emergency at the beginning of 2020 and to introduce the first measures to contain the virus, many believed they were experiencing scenes from a post-apocalyptic film or novel. No matter that no one had ever really seen in person first deserted streets and then billions of people wearing facemasks to protect themselves from a respiratory virus: those images were already part of the repertoire of speculative fiction, they were already set in our collective imagination before they even happened. Historically based on questioning the future and possible scenarios, science fiction has thus confirmed one of its primary functions, that of anticipation, to the point of facilitating the understanding of events during the COVID-19 pandemic.

So what is the role of the literary genre today, five years later? Can science fiction still imagine something new after not only an unprecedented pandemic, but even new wars and the anthropological-technological revolution started by generative artificial intelligence? How can we ensure that thought on COVID-19 is not perceived as outdated, now that society and politics seem to have made a clean sweep of that experience? The volume edited by Riccardo Retez attempts to answer these and other questions, directly or indirectly. Leaving the role of offering an analytical overview of the contents of the collected essays to the editor, I will try here to formulate a synthesis of the paradigm that seems to stand behind the work of Retez and the authors who contributed to this stimulating volume.

Browsing *The Real Aftermath*, the reader should not expect systematicity or global attempts at theorization. Indeed, the key word is disruptiveness. If science fiction is in itself a hybrid literary genre, within which subgenres or labels such as speculative, post-apocalyptic fiction, utopia, uchronia, etc. can also be traced back, Retez takes disruptiveness to a further level, that of the relationship with authors and readers. The subject of his book is in fact “the Way Science Fiction is Conceived, Read, and Interpreted”, highlighting how COVID-19 has had an impact not only on science fiction writing, but also on reading, more specifically on its reception by common readers and scholars themselves.

The disruptive paradigm then emerges from the strong interdisciplinarity of the volume. If the division into three parts seems to suggest that the essays

collected can fall respectively within the disciplines of Cultural Studies, Game Studies and Film Studies, it is also true that each of the essays addresses the question from points of view that are never excessively sectoral, since all the authors seem to be very aware of how, on the one hand, no filmic or game narrative can ignore illustrious literary precedents, and on the other hand, of how science fiction literature itself is today increasingly inspired by films, series and videogames, in a media ecosystem in which all the arts are interconnected.

Finally, I would like to highlight the strong international background of the volume. Compared to other valuable studies dedicated to the issue, Retez's book is in fact characterized by the presence of African, Asian, and South American authors, alongside Europeans and North Americans, each more or less voluntarily witnessing how the pandemic has had an impact on the academic community from all continents. Disruptiveness then becomes plurality, and a traumatic event like COVID-19 can bring together different, often young, scholars around a topic that is already constitutive of the identity of more than a generation.

Ultimately, the fragmentation of the discourse is precisely what makes *The Real Aftermath* a valuable contribution to ongoing studies on the consequences of the pandemic on science fiction. Without any pretension of giving order to the chaos resulting from the emergency, the book edited by Retez offers a plural, diverse, transmedia and interdisciplinary photograph of the aftermath of COVID-19 in the most successful literary genre of recent years, a snapshot in which the reader is invited to concentrate on almost microscopic details after seeing the intricate and challenging overall effect. Just like in the screenshot of a disaster movie. The pandemic calls, science fiction (studies) respond.

# Introduction

## *The Real Aftermath*

Amidst the unprecedented global upheaval brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, a profound metamorphosis has transpired within the domain of science fiction, signifying a substantive evolution both as a literary genre and as a cultural phenomenon. The edited volume *The Real Aftermath: How COVID-19 Changed the Way Science Fiction is Conceived, Read, and Interpreted* endeavors to deconstruct and scrutinize, from a critical multiple standpoints, the nuanced interrelationship between the pandemic and the science fiction genre, marking the passage of four years since the initial outbreak.

The book sees the participation of eminent scholars and authorities in the fields of literature, cultural studies, visual and media studies, constituting a meticulous exploration of the multifaceted ramifications engendered by the global health crisis on the narrative landscape of science fiction. By examining how the pandemic has permeated and refracted through the lens of speculative fiction, contributors' endeavor to unravel the complexities inherent in the intersection of reality and imagination, offering insightful perspectives on the evolving nature of the genre. In elucidating the profound impact of COVID-19 on the conception, reception, and interpretation of science fiction, the authors delve into the thematic, stylistic, and ideological shifts that have emerged in the wake of this unprecedented global event. The edited volume also contemplates how the pandemic has spurred a reevaluation of societal structures, technological advancements, and existential uncertainties within the speculative realms depicted in science fiction narratives. Furthermore, the book delves into the role of science fiction as a reflection of societal anxieties and aspirations in the face of existential threats, with a particular focus on how the pandemic has influenced the portrayal of contagion, dystopia, and resilience in speculative literature. The contributors engage in a scholarly discourse that traverses the boundaries between fiction and reality, exploring how science fiction has become a dynamic tool for processing, understanding, and potentially mitigating the profound disruptions wrought by the ongoing global health crisis.

It is the opinion of multiple sociologists that COVID-19 was a socio-cultural experience that condensed the developments that would have characterized humanity for five years into 2020 alone. As in a science fiction story by Philip K. Dick, a time crack formed, and we lived five years in one: if there had been no pandemic, and we had simply gone on our way, as we thought we would, where

would we have arrived in 2025? Where you are now. As sociologist Lisa Messeri (2017) notes, “Science fiction is a way of imagining futures that we might not otherwise be able to envision.” In the context of COVID-19, science fiction narrative can offer insights into the potential long-term societal impacts of the pandemic, as well as new possibilities for navigating a world transformed by disease. The *real* aftermath of the pandemic is likely to be complex and far-reaching, encompassing everything from changes in global travel patterns to the ways in which people interact with one another. For the past four years, the COVID-19 pandemic has sparked a renewed interest in science fiction narratives that explore the relationship between disease outbreaks, society, and technology. At its core, the book investigates the dynamic relationship between reality and imagination, exploring how the COVID-19 pandemic has blurred the lines between speculative fiction and actuality. The pandemic’s disruption of daily life, the widespread experience of isolation, and the rapid advancement of technology have collectively served to reconfigure the boundaries of plausibility and incredibility within science fiction narratives. This book seeks to explore how the pandemic has challenged established notions of the possible and how science fiction authors have responded to this challenge through their creative works. *The Real Aftermath: How COVID-19 Changed the Way Science Fiction is Conceived, Read, and Interpreted* calls for a deepening of speculative/science/fantasy fiction in various forms of media, emphasizing their connections to history, society, and the present moment. Additionally, it prompts us to carefully consider how utopian and dystopian narratives impact daily life, as they offer potential models for reimagining current circumstances and envisioning alternatives. The edited volume collects contributions that explore the multifaceted relationship between science fiction and society in the *real* aftermath of COVID-19. The eight diverse works proposed in the following pages encapsulate a spectrum of thematic explorations, delving into the evolving contours of speculative literature against the backdrop of the global health crisis. These include insightful analyses of societal restructuring, technological implications, existential uncertainties, and the portrayal of contagion, dystopia, and resilience within the realm of science fiction. The international research by the eight authors involved has been subdivided and grouped according to the themes addressed: first, the cultural implications of the pandemic are discussed in *The Cultural Aftermath*. Next, the developments brought about by media of an interactive nature, such as video games, are considered – *The Interactive Aftermath*. Finally, ample space is left for a reflection involving visual media - books, films, social media – in the construction of a new post-pandemic global identity, that is *The Visual Aftermath*.



In the first place, *The role of science fiction in shaping our understanding of global crises* by Dr. Syed Danish (Sir Syed Case Institute of Technology, Islamabad, Pakistan) explores the role of science fiction in shaping our understanding of global crises: it emphasizes the unique perspective that fiction provides, allowing policymakers to delve into diverse scenarios and enhancing their ability to comprehend the complexities of the human condition. The military's recognition of fiction as a tool for mental simulation and exploration of challenges underscores its potential impact. Moreover, the author delves into the nexus of science fiction and international relations, probing the dynamic interplay between cultural artifacts and the tapestry of social reality. The introduction of the term "intertext" illuminates the reflexive nature of science fiction, accentuating its potential to exert influence on the global political stage and mold collective perceptions. The research expounds on how science fiction has ascended to eminence as a genre proficient in mirroring and prognosticating ideas pertinent to global crises, with a particular focal point on the exigencies of the COVID-19 pandemic. It traces the evolutionary trajectory of science fiction spanning two centuries, commencing with Mary Shelley's magnum opus *Frankenstein*, and extending to contemporary works that grapple with themes such as viral outbreaks and pandemics. This exploration encompasses the far-reaching impact of historical events, such as the Cold War and the aftermath of 9/11, on the thematic contours and prevailing anxieties depicted in science fiction. Finally, the synthesis encapsulates the multifaceted nature of science fiction's sway, enmeshing its role in the realm of policymaking, its nuanced interaction with international relations, and its role as a reflective medium capturing societal responses to the convolutions of global crises – underscoring the genre's inherent capacity to furnish novel perspectives, challenge societal norms, and emerge as an invaluable instrument for unraveling and navigating the intricate tapestry of complex and evolving issues.

Following the issues correlated to global crises, Prof. Dr. Annika McPherson (University of Augsburg, Germany) writes about Indian author Samit Basu's recalibration of his science fiction novel *Chosen Spirits*: released in India in 2020, it serves as a compelling case study illustrating the transformative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the conceptualization of science fiction narratives. The analysis of the modifications made to the original version of the novel not only provides a concise illustration of this shift but also exemplifies how the pandemic has become a catalyst for reimagining speculative futures. Published globally as *The City Inside* in 2022, Basu's revised narrative, or as the author describes it, "*updated*," intricately weaves the near-future storyline with the socio-cultural and political nuances emanating from the confluence of "the pogrom" and "the pandemic." These elements significantly influence the experiences of the post-pandemic generation coming of age in India,

navigating a reality shaped by “smog/plague maxmasks,” life within a surveillance state, and the pervasive impact of advanced social media technologies. The narrative exposes the perpetual confrontation faced by this generation with their parents’ nostalgic recollections of the era preceding “the Years Not to Be Discussed.” Beyond the literal alterations to the narrative and its rootedness in a specific region, the broader implications of this reinterpretation invite a broader contemplation of post-pandemic extrapolative dynamics within the science fiction genre. The metonymic reference to “the Years Not to Be Discussed” aptly captures not only a profound sense of loss but also encapsulates the temporal compression of the pandemic years as a transformative experiential and political threshold. Rather than merely envisioning the unimaginable, this article posits that the reinterpreted narrative signifies a novel ‘atopic’ imaginary. Engaging with the shifts brought about by the pandemic through heightened relatability and familiarity, the novel’s excessive referentiality conveys a distinctive sense of post-pandemic ‘atopia.’ This ‘atopia’ serves as a lens through which to explore changes in geopolitics and popular culture representations, extending the discourse to include examples from science fiction anthology films set in and/or produced during the lockdown.

The broader exploration within this multi-edited book thus unveils the evolving dynamics and narratives that emerge when science fiction confronts and adapts to the profound shifts instigated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The third contribution, by Prof. Alfred Ndi (The University of Bamenda, Republic of Cameroon), titled *Afrofuturism in African Science Fiction: A Weapon for Critiquing Social, Cultural, and Political Issues*, explores science fiction works by Alejandro Morales, Tananarive Due, Octavia Butler, Andrea Hairston, Rosaura Sánchez, and Beatrice Pita, revealing a rich tapestry of themes related to pandemics, outbreaks, human resilience, and fear in the context of existential threats, resonant with the COVID-19 pandemic. These authors employ allegorical narratives that challenge societal perceptions of health crises, with a focus on viral contagion, potential remedies, and survival instincts. Octavia Butler’s *Earth-seed* series examines dystopian worlds, addressing socioeconomic disparities and disease-induced societal collapse, providing insights into societal vulnerability and resilience during crises. Andrea Hairston’s works explore eco-catastrophe, prompting reflections on humanity’s need to acknowledge, adapt, and develop resilience in the face of unpredictable forces, such as the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The collaborative work *Lunar Braceros 2125-2148* by Rosaura Sánchez and Beatrice Pita offers a speculative analysis of global pandemics, highlighting their socio-political effects. Overall, these science fiction narratives serve as powerful tools for exposing readers to perceptions, fears, and realities associated with the current pandemic, without explicitly referencing COVID-

19. The subsequent discussion delves into the broader societal and literary implications of COVID-19 on African science fiction. The genre has shifted from exploring imaginative, optimistic futures to grappling with shared, grim realities and envisioning recovery. African science fiction narratives document, analyze, and speculate on the societal impacts of the pandemic, serving as a barometer of societal values, fears, and hopes. The genre's responsiveness to the pandemic contributes to a refined literary and societal sensitivity toward previously unexplored themes, such as mental health. African science fiction's evolution in response to the pandemic has prompted a reassessment of existing literature, revealing its prescient qualities and increased intersectionality. The genre serves as a roadmap for handling future global crises, emphasizing literature's role in reflecting, critiquing, and understanding societal transformations. The democratization of pandemic experiences in narratives fosters cultural understanding and initiates conversations about shared vulnerabilities, resilience, and adaptability. The profound influence of COVID-19 on African science fiction extends to its readers and creators, prompting reinterpretations, experimentation, and amplified relevance. The genre not only explores possible futures but also serves as a vehicle for dissecting and understanding challenging realities, ensuring sustained growth and popularity in the African literary sphere and beyond. The impact of COVID-19 on African science fiction is pervasive, transforming its conceptual underpinnings, thematic preoccupations, and reception among readers, ultimately turning a human crisis into an opportunity for artistic reflection and societal dialogue.

Moving on to the second part of the book, the relationship between the real COVID-19 aftermath and the science fiction is studied with a focus on interactive media. The first contribution of this section, titled *Death Stranding: The Scorched Earth of Contemporary Video Gaming*, is one of the two works that investigates the role of the video game *Death Stranding* (2019) in its ability to both anticipate and postpone the actual pandemic event. As Luca Miranda (Independent Scholar) states, *Death Stranding* – an action-adventure video game conceived and directed by game designer Hideo Kojima and developed by Kojima Productions – unfolds within a post-apocalyptic milieu, ravaged by a cataclysmic event known as the “Death Stranding.” This event engenders pervasive imbalance, destruction, and mortality, resulting in the *stranding* of marine organisms, depopulation of inhabited regions, resource scarcity, and the emergence of purgatorial entities referred to as “Beached Things” (or “BTs”). These entities, trapped between life and death, generate explosions upon capturing individuals, leading to the formation of extensive craters. The central character, Sam Porter Bridges, assumes the role of a courier tasked with reconnecting surviving communities across the United Cities of America (UCA) by delivering diverse goods, ranging from essential items to recreational objects. The release of *Death Stranding* in 2019, occurring shortly before the

onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, suggests a possible interrelation between its sci-fi catastrophic narrative and the contemporaneous social, economic, environmental, and symbolic transformations. According to Miranda, researcher Jonathan Crary posits that contemporary capitalism manifests as a “scorched Earth,” where affluent regions lose regenerative capacity. This analogy resonates with the narrative of *Death Stranding*, embodying a world shattered and separated, akin to the “scorching” of the planet. The convergence of narratives between the contemporary world and digital media products increasingly blurs categorical boundaries. The video game exemplifies this blurring as players engage in cooperative interactions within a shared, relational world, creating a form of hybrid reality. This transformation of reality mirrors contemporary social dynamics, where technology engenders novel forms of interaction and connection. A pervasive sense of disorientation characterizes the experience in *Death Stranding*, where isolation, hope, and mortality persist as remnants of a fractured world wherein individuals strive to maintain relationships and connections. The tension between persistence and survival versus the allure of oblivion permeates the protagonist, the game environment, and the BTs, indicative of a narrative imperative inherent in and expressed by contemporary media creations.

2020, socially remembered as the year of the COVID-19 pandemic, is also the year in which one of the most critically and commercially successful video games in recent gaming history was released: *The Last of Us Part II*. Developed by American company Naughty Dog, it presents a post-apocalyptic world with a narrative intricacy that challenges storytelling norms. The game skillfully weaves a complex tale of revenge, morality, and the consequences of one's actions in a hauntingly beautiful yet desolate world. Set against meticulously crafted landscapes, the dual perspective narrative, switching between protagonists Ellie and Abby, challenges players with moral ambiguity and unexpected character developments. The game's exceptional character depth fosters a unique player connection. Despite critical acclaim for its technical prowess and innovative gameplay mechanics, the narrative's intense exploration of violence and vengeance has made it divisive. *The Last of Us Part II* remains a bold and ambitious venture, leaving an indelible mark on the evolving landscape of video game storytelling within the post-apocalyptic genre. The success of the video game led to a serial adaptation of the first part of this one, by HBO and released in early 2023.

In their work titled *The Last of Us and Silo: two gloomy moments of science fiction in the context of Covid and Post-Covid aftermath as a futurist pandemic global scenery*, Dr. Paulo Quadros (University of São Paulo, Brazil) explores ethical and philosophical inquiries within the pandemic and post-pandemic contexts depicted in two dystopian science fiction television series: *The Last of*

*Us* and *Silo*. These series depict a world characterized by global devastation, necessitating isolation, distancing, and enclosure for individual and collective self-preservation. Moreover, they redefine new politics of resistance, resilience, and ethical morality in a reality fraught with uncertainties, pervasive doubts, and fears of the unforeseen and uncontrollable unknown. Within these dystopian and speculative fiction worlds, novel rituals of human relations emerge, giving rise to affective bonds formed through unconventional contacts. The distinction between truth and falsehood becomes continually blurred in a society that redefines its value codes for individual and human survival. The dialectic explored in both series revolves around the tension between the imperative of social isolation as a means of safeguarding life and the perpetual desire to break free from confinement, seeking a libertarian existence and an understanding of the external world despite the attendant dangers. In *The Last of Us*, venturing beyond the presumed safety and isolation of walls reveals a world devastated and annihilated by a zombie pandemic caused by the cordyceps fungus. This real-world fungus takes on a permanent and socially terrorizing role in the apocalyptic vision of the series, instilling fear through the notions of infection and the zombification process. Conversely, in *Silo*, terror emerges from the quest for truth outside the subterranean world, where people are divided into castes with varying privileges and non-privileges. Social differences and prejudices are determined by the levels or floors on which individuals reside within the silo. Concerns among the inhabitants revolve around the breathability of the atmosphere outside and the potential annihilation of the world beyond. This study draws on various theoretical frameworks to underpin its exploration, including Donna Haraway's *Plantationocene*, *Anthropocene*, and *Capitalocene*; Jason Moore's concept of *Cheap Nature*; Stefan Herbrechter's *Critical Posthumanism*; Elizabeth Ginway's perspective on Brazilian Science-Fiction; Fredrich Jameson's *Archaeologies of Future*; Margaret Atwood's exploration of Speculative Fiction; Michel Foucault's ideas on *Biopolitics*, *Biopower*, and *the Aesthetics of Existence*; Giorgio Agamben's reflections on the *Plague and the State of Exception*; Angela Davis and Naomi Klein's examination of Social Movements in times of Pandemic; Slavoj Žižek's insights on *Pandemic and the Re-invention of Community Values*; and Boaventura de Souza Santos' exploration of *The Pedagogy of the Coronavirus*.

Concluding the second part of the book, another contribution is dedicated to *Death Stranding*, but with a different focus. In *Facing the Sixth Extinction: Pandemic and Mass Extinction in Dystopian Video Games – Case of Death Stranding*, Dr. Tijana Rupčić (Central European University in Vienna, Austria) claims that the convergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate fiction, and the video game *Death Stranding* presents a distinctive lens through which we may scrutinize the interrelated nature of global crises and the fortitude of the

human spirit in the face of adversity. The pandemic, with its extensive repercussions on health, economies, and societal structures, has compelled humanity to confront vulnerabilities on a global scale. Concurrently, climate fiction, mirroring human anxieties and aspirations for the environmental future, advocates contemplation of the ramifications of human actions and the imperative of sustainable practices. In its capacity as a narratively rich video game, *Death Stranding* adeptly interlaces these themes, depicting a world fractured by isolation, environmental degradation, and the pursuit of meaningful connections. A central motif surfaces in *Death Stranding*: the potency of human connection and collaboration in surmounting ostensibly insurmountable challenges. On one hand, the pandemic has laid bare shared vulnerabilities, underscoring the significance of solidarity in confronting the global crisis. Moreover, science fiction has afforded individuals the opportunity to explore diverse pandemic scenarios in a secure setting, allowing for the reliving of potential situations and the confrontation of fears within a controlled environment. On the other hand, climate fiction operates as a speculative mirror, urging humanity to reevaluate its relationship with the planet and envision both negative and positive futures. The climate fiction, influenced by apprehensions of extinction, indicates a collective awareness of the perils inflicted upon the biosphere by the industrial and hyper-capitalistic age. *Death Stranding*, through interactive storytelling, prompts players to grapple with isolation, environmental decay, and the pursuit of meaningful connections in a fractured world. Numerous players have articulated reflections on the parallels between *Death Stranding* and the realities of life during the COVID-19 pandemic. Initial reviews, dismissing the possibility of humanity being confined to quarantines and the world depending on courier services as implausible or even comical, were contradicted by the emergence of a pandemic of such magnitude and severity that engulfed the entire world. *Death Stranding*, therefore, served as a platform for discussing the challenges of isolation, the newfound significance of professions such as delivery, previously overlooked, and the essential need for human connection. Many players found emotional solace in playing *Death Stranding*, reliving aspects of the pandemic that had affected them in real life. The game's innovative multiplayer option garnered praise, with players describing positive interactions and a sense of belonging in virtual togetherness while still physically apart. In the aftermath of the pandemic, the insights derived from COVID-19, the cautionary tales conveyed in climate fiction, and the virtual odyssey of *Death Stranding* collectively inspire to forge a more resilient, interconnected, and sustainable future.

The third and final part of the book is dedicated to the visual relationships between science fiction and COVID-19. *NOPE - How to Refuse the Cannibalistic Culture of the Spectacle*, by Dr. Emily Margaret FitzGerald (Columbia University, New York, US), focuses on the notion of spectacles, as discussed in Jordan Peele's film *Nope*. Here, it becomes a lens through which we explore both obscured perspectives and hidden opportunities for connection. Peele's work, as a cinematic spectacle demanding our attention, prompts reflection on the nuanced interplay between technology and human engagement. Spectacles and technologies are neither inherently positive nor negative; their impact is contingent upon the way individuals interact with them. The proposition, both by the present analysis and implicit in Peele's film, underscores the necessity of engaging with these entities on an embodied level. This entails a conscious awareness of their significance for our existence as entities within the world, emphasizing a connection that transcends mere ownership or capture. Within the cinematic realm of *Nope*, the visual spectacle assumes a pivotal role in encouraging viewers to contemplate their sensory engagement as an integral facet of embodied interaction. Analogous references to film and photography within the narrative serve as metacognitive examples, prompting critical exploration of what captures our attention and how to maintain autonomy amid the allure of spectacle culture. Beyond the visual elements, the auditory component of *Nope* plays a significant role, particularly through the inclusion of the song *Exuma, The Obeah Man* by Tony Mackey. Peele's deep appreciation for Mackey's music, described as "aural movies about zombies, gods, and slaves rising up to punish their oppressors," establishes a parallel between the unnamed rider and Mackey. This musical inclusion aligns with the film's overarching theme of giving agency to historically marginalized figures, contributing to a layered narrative that extends beyond the visual spectacle. *Nope* presents an opportunity to engage with neglected and oppressive histories, advocating for inclusive alternatives rooted in mutual care and respect. This necessitates a willingness to acknowledge diverse viewpoints, perspectives, and experiences that diverge from the prevailing status quo. In contrast, the film juxtaposes this approach with Guy Debord's concept of the "society of the spectacle," warning against a self-absorbed discourse that perpetuates a monologue of self-praise, ultimately resulting in shallow and unfulfilling content. The film serves as a critical commentary on the risks inherent in succumbing to spectacles, which may lead to a consumption of ourselves and others.

Finally, the concept of spectacle gives place to the one of cosmopolitanism, in Tianren Luo's (Fudan University, China) and Wang Xing's (Renmin University of China) *In the Ruins of Cosmopolitanism. Re-reading Cixin Liu and Song Han in the Post-COVID Age*. In the decade preceding COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a notable resurgence of cosmopolitanism; however, it is discernible that

several cosmopolitan programs, often grounded in idealistic liberal doctrines or a morally feeble appeal to “loyalties to humanity as a whole,” are experiencing a state of insolvency when confronted with the substantive crisis posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Alain de Benoist observes that the pandemic signals the termination of the era of globalization and the liberalist narrative of progress. Correspondingly, Daniel Chernilo contends that the pandemic is reshaping our conceptualization of cosmopolitanism itself. The closure of borders and the imposition of states of emergency have, notably, reinforced sovereign powers, presenting a less than sanguine prospect: while the liberal global order struggles for sustainability, the pandemic has revitalized a semblance of Schmittian thought. In China, the ascent of Neo-Schmittian discourses, highlighting the vulnerability of a liberal cosmopolitan community and advocating for authoritarianism or even totalitarianism, represents the ultimate trajectory of post-pandemic political imagination. Strikingly, Chinese science fiction writers Cixin Liu and Song Han have previously explored this theme in their works. By closely examining Cixin Liu’s novelette “Full Spectrum Barrage Jamming” and Song Han’s “Subway,” this analysis endeavors to elucidate how these authors envision the dissolution of the global community and the emergence of Schmittian neo-authoritarian populism in the context of a planetary crisis. Nevertheless, within the crisis—the Kairos—arises an opportunity for action. The decline of cosmopolitanism and the ascendancy of Neo-Schmittianism rekindle an age-old question: Socialism or Barbarism? As posited by Sladdin Ahmed, the COVID crisis has concurrently unveiled new prospects for communism. It is crucial to underscore that, for Liu and Han, Neo-Schmittianism does not manifest as a viable response to the ongoing catastrophe. Consequently, the works of these authors serve as a critique of the Schmittian political paradigm. Moreover, Liu and Han beckon us to envision and strive for an alternative future following an inevitable global crisis.

The gathered proposals critically examine how science fiction narratives, across different media, reflect and influence social, cultural, and political realities, exploring the intersections of science fiction with diverse fields, such as history, sociology, philosophy, gender studies, and media studies. Noteworthy previous and parallel works, in the context of which the present edited volume is involved, include *After the Pandemic: Visions of Life Post COVID-19* (Lawrence Knorr, US, 2020); *Covid Fiction* (Zucchini Marco, Italy, 2021); *The Anthropocene Reviewed* (John Green, UK, 2021). Through its rigorous examination of pandemic-influenced science fiction narratives and the evolving dynamics of reader engagement, this book not only enriches the ongoing scholarly conversation but also paves the way for a more profound understanding of the intricate interplay between fiction, reality, and the human psyche. Finally, this edited book aims to advance the dialogue on how the



pandemic changed the way science fiction is conceived, read, and interpreted and to offer a comprehensive analysis of the genre's impact on our *real* world.

Riccardo Retez, Editor

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# About the Authors

## **Riccardo Retez, editor**

Riccardo Retez, Ph.D. in Visual and Media Studies at the IULM University in Milan, is Adjunct Professor in Television and Media History at the LABA of Florence, Italy, with a research focus on Social studies, Audience studies and Game studies.

His doctoral research (IULM University of Milan, 2024) investigated spectator behavior on game live-streaming platforms according to social consumption phenomena. He obtained his Master of Arts degree in Television, Cinema and New Media at IULM University in 2019 and his Bachelor Arts Degree at the LABA of Florence in 2017. He contributes to academic publications in international journals and volumes (Concrete Press 2020, Ludica 2020; Eracle Journal 2021, IFM 2021, Phoenix Papers 2022, Oxford Press 2023, Mimesis 2024) and works as curator of events concerned with contemporary visual culture. In this field, he has recently worked as project manager of festivals related to science fiction and its perception between academia and public within Italian and American universities (IULM University, 2021-2022-2023, The University of New Mexico, 2023). He is interested in the consumption of science fiction in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic emerge as a result of research conducted in the context of the doctoral research in audience studies that has demonstrated a growing reevaluation of speculative fiction in the face of the recent pandemic.

## **Syed Danish, author**

Syed Danish is a Ph.D. Candidate at the Department of Management Science, Sir Syed Case Institute of Technology, Islamabad, Pakistan. His focus research is on supply chain, COVID-19 and mass media. Currently, he has published three research papers, four research papers are under review and submitted a book chapter for publication in Bentham Science Publishers. Parallel to the academic experience, over the last thirteen years, he has worked in a diverse array of management field leading to the conclusion that management science is the most appropriate to pursue in achieving his professional objectives.

## **Emily FitzGerald**

Emily FitzGerald is a Ph.D. candidate in Religious Studies at Columbia University. She is an adjunct professor for the Philosophy department at SUNY

Purchase, where she teaches courses on human nature, philosophy of religion, and East Asian philosophy. Her work revolves around mutual embodiment and virtuality, particularly in phenomenology, deconstruction, Buddhist thought, and martial arts. She is currently finishing her dissertation on embodied imagination in karate kata and the ways in which movement practices can break down untenable binaries and the unethical traces of Western Humanism. She also works part-time as a martial arts instructor and SEO specialist.

### **Tianren Luo**

Tianren Luo is a scholar from the School of Philosophy of Fudan University. His recent research interests include critical theories, radical political theories, utopian studies, and contemporary French theory. He is also a freelance translator who has translated several articles by Guattari, Debord, Tiqqun, and Malabou into Chinese. He is now interested in science fiction, trying to read SF texts both as an allegory of the global capitalist system and as what embodies radical political imagination. Through his research, he attempts to uncover the radical potentials within the experiences of the minority to seek a possible way of resistance in the neoliberal world.

### **Annika McPherson**

Annika McPherson is Professor of New English Literatures and Cultural Studies at the University of Augsburg, Germany. She previously taught British and Global Anglophone Literary and Cultural Studies at Carl von Ossietzky University Oldenburg and has been a guest lecturer at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. From 2017-2019, she was President of the Association for Anglophone Postcolonial Studies (GAPS). Her research areas include postcolonial and diaspora studies; cultural diversity; comparative Caribbean, West African, South African, Indian and Canadian literatures and televisual media in English; as well as speculative and science fiction with a focus on representational shifts in global streaming media.

### **Luca Miranda**

Luca Miranda is a curator and artist who lives and works in Italy. His research focuses on game studies, the relationship between reality and simulation, and the aesthetic potential of the avatar. He experiments with game photography and machinima. In 2020, he earned a Master's degree in TV, Cinema, and New Media from IULM University in Milan. Since 2020, he has been collaborating as a curator with the Milan Machinima Festival. His first book, titled *Giocare a camminare*, which examines the walking simulator genre and the relationship

between video games and the artistic process, was published in December 2021.

**Alfred Ndi**

Professor Alfred Ndi is a highly respected scholar and professor at the University of Bamenda, specializing in African literature and culture, electronic literatures, political economy, critical theory, and management consulting. With a wealth of knowledge and expertise in these fields, Professor Ndi has made significant contributions to the study and understanding of African literary traditions, cultural practices, and their intersections with technology and economics. His research explores themes of identity, power dynamics, and social change within African societies. Professor Ndi's interdisciplinary approach and commitment to critical thinking have brought him recognition both in academia and the consulting industry, establishing him as a prominent figure in his fields of expertise.

**Paulo Quadros**

Paulo Quadros is a Post-doctoral researcher at the School of Communications and Arts of the University of São Paulo (USP, Brazil) with a focus on studies of digital philosophy and aesthetics. He is also a digital literacy consultant for the Kid IMATECH Academy of São Paulo, responsible for distance education and culture studies, international cooperation activities, and currently the coordinator of digital aesthetics area. Scientific researcher at CIC.Digital - Portuguese center for inter-university and multi-site research in communication, information and digital culture (member of Nova / ICNova Communication Institute, University Nova of Lisbon); member of the research group of Epistemology of the Social Dialogue and Pedagogical Cybernetics research group, also of the School of Communications and Arts of University of São Paulo.

**Tijana Rupcic**

Tijana Rupcic is a PhD Candidate at the Central European University, Department of History, Austria. After finishing a BA in History at the University of Belgrade, Serbia (2011), she completed her Master of Arts in Ancient Greek and Roman History and Philosophy at the University of Novi Sad, Serbia (2014) and MA in Comparative History at Central European University, Budapest, Hungary (2020) focusing on the History of Technology and Science and History of Yugoslavia. During the MA studies, she completed the specialization in Archives and Evidentiary Practices at OSA Vera and Donald Blinken Archives,

Budapest. She holds an Advanced Certificate in Religious and Jewish Studies and has worked as an archivist in the Historical Archives in Kikinda, Serbia (2012-2019), focusing on preserving damaged documents and creating analytical registries. Her current research interests are history of technology and science, transhumanism, videogames, relationship between technology and religion.

**Wang Xing**

Wang Xing is a researcher affiliated with the Department of Comparative Literature at the Renmin University of China. He focuses on the exploration of science fiction within contemporary China and the evolving field of digital humanities. He has devoted effort to delving into the archives of science fiction during the late Qing period in China, unearthing shedding light on the political significance embedded within it.

# Glossary

## **Afrofuturism**

A cultural aesthetic that combines science fiction, history, and African cultural traditions to imagine futures influenced by Black identity and experience. Authors like Octavia Butler and Tananarive Due use Afrofuturism to explore themes of resilience, identity, and community in speculative contexts, often addressing historical traumas and envisioning hopeful futures.

## **Climate Fiction (Cli-Fi)**

A subgenre of speculative fiction that focuses on the effects of climate change and ecological collapse. Climate fiction blends scientific concerns about environmental degradation with human narratives. Authors like Kim Stanley Robinson use this genre to explore human resilience, policy solutions, and the moral dilemmas of ecological crises.

## **Cultural Aftermath**

The impact of global events, such as pandemics, on cultural expression and collective imagination. Literature and media often reflect societal trauma and transformation during crises. For instance, COVID-19 inspired new narratives addressing themes of isolation, resilience, and collective vulnerability, as seen in contemporary video games and dystopian literature.

## **Dystopian Narratives**

Stories set in oppressive societies characterized by authoritarian control, loss of individual freedoms, and societal decay. Dystopian fiction critiques present-day sociopolitical systems by imagining worst-case scenarios. Examples include Orwell's *1984*, where surveillance and propaganda dominate, and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, examining gender oppression.

## **Hard Science Fiction**

A subgenre that emphasizes scientific accuracy and logical extrapolation of real-world science and technology. Hard science fiction appeals to readers interested in plausible scenarios rooted in scientific principles. Works like

Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey* explore space exploration, artificial intelligence, and humanity's place in the universe.

### **Interactive Aftermath**

The exploration of interactive media, such as video games, as a means of responding to and reimagining global crises like COVID-19. Interactive media like *Death Stranding* and *The Last of Us* provide players with immersive experiences that parallel real-world challenges. These narratives blur boundaries between reality and fiction, offering perspectives on isolation, resilience, and communal connections in post-apocalyptic settings. Interactive media's role as a space for safe experimentation with societal breakdown and recovery positions it as a unique cultural response to crises.

### **Intertext**

The relationship between a text and its cultural, political, or historical context. The term highlights how speculative fiction mirrors societal anxieties, such as global pandemics or authoritarian regimes. These narratives often serve as allegories for real-world challenges, providing both critique and foresight.

### **Media Ecosystem**

The interconnected landscape of storytelling media, including literature, film, and video games. Science fiction increasingly operates in this ecosystem, influencing and drawing from diverse cultural expressions to create immersive, multidimensional narratives.

### **Pandemic Narratives**

Stories exploring the societal, psychological, and cultural impact of disease outbreaks and their aftermath. From Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* to Ling Ma's *Severance*, pandemic fiction uses the metaphor of disease to critique societal fragility, resilience, and human behavior during crises.

### **Post-apocalyptic Fiction**

A subgenre of speculative fiction that imagines the aftermath of catastrophic events, focusing on societal collapse and survival. These narratives often explore how humanity copes with the remnants of civilization after disasters like pandemics, nuclear wars, or environmental crises. Works like George Stewart's *Earth Abides* examine the challenges of rebuilding in a barren world.



**Soft Science Fiction**

Focuses on speculative elements that prioritize character development, societal implications, and philosophical inquiries over scientific accuracy. Examples include *Star Wars* and *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin, which explore themes of politics, gender, and morality in speculative settings.

**Speculative Fiction**

A broad literary genre encompassing works that explore imaginative and futuristic concepts, often questioning current societal norms or proposing alternate realities. Speculative fiction includes science fiction, fantasy, dystopian, and utopian narratives. It delves into "what if" scenarios, encouraging readers to rethink possibilities beyond the constraints of reality. Key themes include advanced technology, societal evolution, and existential threats.

**Transmedia Storytelling**

The practice of telling a single story or story experience across multiple platforms and formats, such as books, video games, and films. Examples like *The Last of Us* explore how narratives can shift and evolve in different media, enriching audience engagement with speculative themes.

**Uchronia**

Alternative histories in speculative fiction that imagine how the present might differ if historical events had occurred differently. Works like Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* explore the sociopolitical implications of these imagined realities.

**Visual Aftermath**

The exploration of how visual media—such as films, television, and digital platforms—respond to and reflect global crises, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic. This concept examines how visual storytelling mediums process collective trauma and reimagine societal norms through allegory, spectacle, and symbolic imagery.