Book Reviews

A Tale Told by a Machine:

The AI Narrator in Contemporary Science Fiction Novels

HEATHER DUERRE HUMANN. **A Tale Told by a Machine: The AI Narrator in Contemporary Science Fiction Novels.** McFarland, 2023 (1st ed.). 185 p.

ISBN: 978-1-4766-8932-6. $49.95.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that an AI in a science fiction novel must be in want of othering. Throughout the 20th century, AI have been Capek's enslaved workers, Asimov's rule-abiding helpers, and Dick's unsympathetic fiends. But somewhere in the early 21st century, sci-fi writers began to shift from AI as Other to AI as Narrator. Such is the focus of Heather Duerre Humann's excellent new monograph, *A Tale Told by a Machine: The AI Narrator in Contemporary Science Fiction Novels*. Drawing on narrative theory, posthumanism, and cognitive science, Humann argues that novels in which the story is told by an artificially intelligent being offer new perspectives on identity, selfhood, and personhood. Humann's express goal is to uncover "the nuanced ways that contemporary authors rely upon AI narrators in their fiction," within the context of 21st century scientific advancements in artificial intelligence (17-8). Her core argument, then, is that "AI narrators call attention to the narrative act while also show-casing the erosion of clear boundaries between humans and machine" (21).

Indeed, Humann accomplishes her goal by analyzing six novels of the past two decades: *Ancillary Justice* by Anne Leckie (2013); *Aurora* by Kim Stanley Robinson (2015); *All Systems Red* by Martha Wells (2017); *The Unseen World* by Liz Moore (2016); *The Actuality* by Paul Braddon (2021); and *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro (2021). Each novel gets its own chapter, moving (mostly) chronologically, with each chapter structured similarly according to plot summary, brief literature review, and extended textual analysis of the construction of AI selfhood through the text's narrative strategies. Each chapter uncovers a slightly different aspect of AI narrator and selfhood. Chapter 1, "*Corporeality, Selfhood, and Narrative shifts in* Ancillary Justice" offers "de-familiarization," or the rendering of familiar cultural meanings as wholly unfamiliar, and the blurred lines between object and subject. In chapter 2, "The Dawning of AI Sentience in *Aurora*," the narrator develops selfhood through the very act of storytelling, a self-conscious postulation on the role of narration in human existence. Chapter 3, "From Object to Subject in *All Systems Red,"* explores self-determination as a marker of (post)humanity. Chapter 4, "Seeing the Narrative in *The Unseen World,"* ponders the nature of consciousness. Chapter 5,

"(Post)Human Rights in *The Actuality,"* ponders rights and autonomy. And finally, Chapter 6, "Klara Speaks: Narrative Voice in *Klara and the Sun,"* touches on intertextuality, objectivity/subjectivity, and the very muddy notion of selfhood in narrative structures. Along the way, Humann incorporates all the classic theories and theorists, from the trolley problem to the Cyborg Manifesto, offering a thoughtful, if a bit stale and unsurprising, primer to the cultural study of AI.

There are two particularly strong aspects of the book: Humann's use of cognitive science and the exceptional textual analysis throughout the body chapters. In the introduction, Humann intentionally sets out to contextualize the novels she studies within the popular science of the 21st century:

> This analysis will demonstrate that some of these same principles related to narratology and cognitive science apply to contemporary science fiction—that is, fictional works published during a time when progress is rapidly being made with respect to machine learning. Thus, this book will therefore reveal how this theoretical ground-working can be applied in newly relevant ways since it connects innovations in narrative . . . with contemporary technological innovations. (17-8)

This is a smart move that follows past trends in literary theory. Although theories like psychoanalysis have fallen out of favor, the study of classic Hollywood cinema through this lens makes sense in the context of the Freudian pop-psychology so prevalent in US culture of the time. Likewise, contemporary postmodern novels can be thoughtfully read through the lens of our contemporary pop-science understanding of AI. Humann blends posthumanism and light cognitive theory throughout the chapters, but to greatest effect in chapter 5's analysis of *The Actuality.* Here, she spends a great deal of time weaving together philosophy and science to explore the nature of consciousness and the production of narrative cognition in the novel's AI narrator, Evie. This part of the chapter also exemplifies the other strength of the book: Humann's spectacular textual analysis. She meticulously returns to each text again and again, offering thorough evidence for each claim. Her work is so strong in this area that I can imagine using excerpts from the book as models for my own students in how to closely analyze literature with a theoretical lens.

While there is much to recommend in this book, there are also two main shortcomings. First is that Humann does not ever situate the novels she analyzes within the context of science fiction history, even as she does a wonderful job of situating AI narrators in a technocultural paradigm shift. Throughout the book, she pays lip service to a few famous texts here and there (notably *Frankenstein* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*). In chapter 5, there is even an entire subsection called "*The Actuality's* Reliance on Tropes," in which she mentions only three other texts: *Bladerunner*, *Westworld*, and *Ex Machina* (118-9). But at no point does she effectively examine the fact that AI narration is itself a paradigm shift within the science fiction genre. As I alluded to at the start of this review, AI fiction of the 20th century almost exclusively used human or omniscient narrators, placing the human at the center of the story. Humann rightfully points out that AI narrators displace the human in the narration (7), but does not connect that fact to the historical roots of the genre. This is an important point to make, and one that I'm surprised to have found absent from an otherwise strong work of science fiction criticism.

Second, Humann relies heavily on classic theory texts, to the exclusion of more recent work, including those that take Haraway and Hayles to task. I would generally expect to see much deeper theoretical synthesis in a work that intentionally sets out to ground itself in the cultural theory of AI.

With that said, I think the best place for this book is in the undergraduate literature, philosophy, or sociology classroom. (I will certainly be using excerpts in my own robot literature course going forward!) And this is where the shortcomings can easily be overcome: undergraduates do notice the shift in narration from human to AI, and so many of us do teach both Hayles and Haraway in our courses. So, I think giving students Humann's book will provide them with key theoretical foundations for further discussion and exploration.

LIZ W. FABER

Assistant Professor of English & Communication

Dean College

efaber@dean.edu