

## REVIEWS

Zuzanna Ładyga, *Rethinking Postmodern Subjectivity: Emmanuel Levinas and the Ethics of Referentiality In the Work of Donald Barthelme*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009. 192 pages.

**Between the Said-ness, Ipseity of the Same and Amphibology of the Saying's Trace:  
Zuzanna Ładyga's Levinasian Exploration  
of Donald Barthelme's Ethics of Referentiality**

As if everyone forgot that despite or, as Levinas would say, because of the incapacity of language to represent reality, words do have the ethical potential to affect it.

(Zuzanna Ładyga)

I do believe that my every sentence trembles with morality – it's full of morality. But it's the morality of an attempt.

(Donald Barthelme, interview with Jo Brans)

You must be able to tolerate the anxiety.

(Donald Barthelme, *The Dead Father*)

With the benefit of hindsight provided by nearly half a century of cultural wars, critical debates, and changing critical paradigms, in particular the 1990s “ethical turn,” *Rethinking Postmodern Subjectivity*, an excellent and engaging book by Zuzanna Ładyga, proposes a new and subtle perception of the ideological and political complexity, philosophical depth, and ethical consequences of the early postmodern and postmodern aesthetics, in particular those at work in the construction of subjectivity in the novels of Donald Barthelme, a writer accorded a prominent place in the postmodern canon.

Ładyga's book's dense argumentation departs from the observation that the tradition of critical readings of Barthelme's works is punctuated by incompatibilities and discrepancies, with the critics of Larry McCaffery's and Jerome Klinkowitz's generation enthusiastically, and with formalist gusto, inquiring into “programmatically postmodern markers [such] as metanarrativization, pastiche, self-referential play with language, and surfictionality” (8), whereas since 1990s the critics of the historicizing persuasion, seeking to reveal the ideological and philosophical positions informing experimental postmodern-

ism seem to have been largely unsuccessful in exploring the problem of referentiality and affect construction in Barthelme's writing. Ładyga points out that both the ongoing debate concerning the status of the subject in postmodernity and lacunae in our understanding of ideological and political significance of postmodern experiments "in the shaping of contemporary American letters" (8) call for a re-investigation of the construction of the postmodern subject in order to transgress the terms of "totalizing humanism and negative theology" (9).

In view of "Barthelme's varied dialogical subject constructs which, unsubsumable under one totalizing critical definition, oscillate between conventional unity and experimental disruptiveness" (9), Ładyga's decision to turn to Emmanuel Levinas's formulation of the concept of the ethical subject in order to re-examine these notoriously systematization-eluding literary subjectivities in Barthelme's work proves most compelling. She stresses a parallel between the philosopher's efforts to identify the ethical dimension of language and the postmodern writer's sensitivity to the connection between the "tangibility of literary subject constructs" (9) and the sense that real-life intersubjective relations are confined within linguistically defined bounds.

It thus comes as no surprise that in an almost Levinasian vein Ładyga challenges the reader to participate along with her in this intellectually adventurous journey – a metaphor that seems pertinent at this point inasmuch as she speaks of the relations between the subject, ethics, and language in terms of a 'map.' The author observes that Levinas's radical revision of the concept of subjectivity "draws a precise map of the relations between ethics, subjectivity and the workings of language, a map that may prove particularly helpful when it comes to a critical analysis of those subject constructs that stubbornly evade the affirmative or negative theoretical models" (9). In the philosopher's non-totalizing perspective the subject emerges as a result of substitution for the Other that occurs as the instance of an "irruption of language by the ethical Saying" (9) that is, a momentary event of the Self being put into question by the Other. The Levinasian transitory, 'uncertain' and questioning subjectivity construct neither seeks ontological and epistemological stability nor proclaims the complete dissolution of the subject. Moreover, in emphasizing the "relation between language and the tangibly real" (9) and the role it assigns to the notion of sensibility, Levinas's concept of subjectivity casts a new light on Barthelme's referentiality and affect construction methods.

As early as in the introduction Ładyga draws the readers' attention to Barthelme's essay "Not-Knowing" (1985), in which he refers to the eponymous 'not-knowing' as a certain ultra-sensibility to the ethical dimension of language, which does not, however – Ładyga advises emphatically – testify to the writer's "moralistic" tendency as some critics would have it. In a delightful paragraph full of attenuated irony on her part when reminding us

of the writer's attitude "utterly ironic about his own authority," she further explains that Barthelme's view is not that of ethics as "a set of extra-linguistic corrective standards" (10). Instead, the writer perceives the ethical relation between literature and real as grounded in a sensibility to both the violent power of language in the act of representation and the world's vulnerability to that power. Levinas and Barthelme thus meet on common ground of understanding that ethics as a language phenomenon "must be differentiated from any fixed system of moral rules" (11).

Whiteheadian subdivision of *Rethinking Postmodern Subjectivity* into chapters and sections provides the flow of sustained and complex argument modeled on the style of the continental philosophy with an orderly and systematic shape, as well as dividing it into discrete portions, enacting, as it were, a dialogical tension between the flow of real life and the violence of language in the act of representing it, a violence intrinsic to Barthelme's conception of referentiality. Such organization of the text makes it both accessible and difficult for the readers, not necessarily questioning our habits of approaching critical texts altogether but nevertheless putting our scholarly certainties into question, and thus leading to a conclusion that in this encounter with the readers Ładyga perhaps offers an ethically charged Levinasian vision of academic endeavor.

Chapter one is devoted to a meticulous and thorough discussion of the philosopher's ethical perspective and its relevance to literary studies, a topic that, as the author remarks, has never been examined in detail. In the philosopher's conception of the encounter with the other in language, the ontological *Said* is juxtaposed with instances of disruption by the performative acts of language, referred to by Levinas as the ethical *Saying* that belongs to the realm of "the otherwise-than-being" (19). It is a "manifestation of the Face's unique expression which signifies beyond the Said, a realization of the proximity to the Other" (19). Levinas's conception of ethics as a re-inspection, or 'deconstruction' of the limits of the language of ontology has an affinity with postmodern strategies of subject construction. It should be noted that "Levinas's rendition of the subject's rapport with otherness as the linguistic interplay of the Saying and the Said [also] illuminates the problematics of text/reader relations" (21).

Ładyga engages Levinas's ideas in the dialogue with the views of Jaques Lacan, Donald Winnicott, and Gilles Deleuze. The problematic aspects of postmodern literary subjectivity construction strategies are thus elucidated, and an amphibological approach – that is, Jean-Francois Lyotard's idea that the only possible way of doing justice to Levinas's ethics is by misreading it (i.e. avoiding fixed meanings) – emerges as an operative concept.

Although Lacan's and Levinas's positions on the origin of the subject converge when it comes to placing it in the traumatic encounter with the Other, in Levinas's account the Saying belongs to a different order than the ontological Said, whereas Lacan's account

ontologizes the moment of the subject's emergence. Ladyga further examines the vexed issue of the role of gender in the process of ethical subject's formation in view of both thinkers "reliance on paternal family metaphor" (42). Levinas's attempt to broaden the definition of ethics by introducing the concept of *the Third* is implicitly based on the assumption of "the feminine as incompleteness and a signifier of the private relation of home that is detached from community" (43). Thus, the feminist claim, that even modified by the addition of *the Third*, Levinasian framework is not conducive to raising the question of feminist politics, must be taken into account when using Levinas "in a discussion of a postmodern writer whose women figures usually do quite well in terms of subverting the system or at least plotting political acts of revolt against its hegemony" (44).

Ladyga also explores the significance of Winnicott's concept of 'transitional space' to literary studies. The psychologist considers it an intermediary territory between the subject and the (m)other, where the differentiation processes of the subject can occur – neither in the subject alone or entirely outside of it – and where in playing the child performs its own becoming. Winnicott's view that art is transitional phenomenon and thus encompasses both the subject and the Other within, as Ladyga elegantly puts it, "the fluid spatio-temporal boundaries of its in-betweenness" (52) is crucial for her readings of Barthelme's postmodernist construction of subjectivities, ranging from those of characters, through that of the writer to those of the readers.

Gilles Deleuze's anti-humanistic approach to affectivity in art provides an explanation of the materiality of the artwork. He emphasizes the dissociation of the artist's actual emotions and sensibility from the form of the work. Deleuze proposes that lived emotions and affections turn to affects and perceptions turn to percepts, which, in turn, make the material expressive of itself. The only resemblance to perceive is that between the sensation 'wrested' from human perceptions and emotions and the artwork's material form which made this 'wresting' possible. The philosopher admits, however that it is difficult to show "where the material ends and the 'wrested' sensation begins" (58), which is very similar to the indeterminacy of sensibility invoked by Levinas.

Having examined and problematized Levinas's ethical perspective in relation to post-structuralist views on the links between subject formation and affectivity in reality and art, Ladyga proposes, in chapters two to four new, elegant, insightful and complex readings of Donald Barthelme's novels, *Snow White* (1967), *The Dead Father* (1975), *Paradise* (1986) and *The King* (published posthumously, 1990) come from different stages of his career as a postmodern writer and showcase different moments in the evolution of writer's interest (whether consciously acknowledged or not) in the ethics of referentiality.

The anticipation of the potentially possible ethical language in *Snow White*, expressed in terms of a tension between the referential trope of fatigue and the performative trope of indolence, which reflects the language of the novel being poised between “aspiration to represent and a recognition of the futility of the wish” (178) and its subjectivity emerging “in the mode of anticipation” (178), gives way in *The Dead Father* to Barthelme’s investigation of the boundaries of literary language. In discussing this novel, Ładyga introduces the concept of ipseity. It refers to the referential capacity of language encountering its limits and folding in on itself by returning to its own tangibility. The trope of ipseity “organizes the book’s thematic focus on transgressions of the corporeal by modulating different levels of mimetism” (178). The rupturing force of the referential confusion marks the moment of the emergence of the book’s ethical subjectivity.

Problematizing “the ethical aspect of the postmodern work’s relation with its reader” (178), *Paradise*, published one year later than the essay “Not-Knowing,” which explicitly declares the writer’s preoccupation with ethicity of writing, explodes its apparently traditional realist form by amplifying the mimetic effect of the Said-ness and thus textualizes the ethical. On the other hand, *The King* “makes the ethics of literary language its central theme” (179) rather than exploring the ethical dimension of language’s potential for disruption. The novel presents a powerful and explicit critique of modernism’s entanglement in politics and its obliviousness to “the harmful potential of words” (179) and their impact in real life. Ładyga concludes her book with the observation that Barthelme’s relinquishing of his efforts to construct non-totalizing subjectivities might perhaps be seen as embracing of a somewhat utopian – but therefore, one might add, potentially evoking the menace of dystopia – belief that certain situations justify the adoption of a corrective ethical stance.

*Rethinking Postmodern Subjectivity* is not only an incisive and interesting inquiry into the vicissitudes of ethical thinking of Donald Barthelme as a postmodern writer, but also transforms our understanding of the postmodern aesthetics. Zuzanna Ładyga’s book constitutes an excellent transitional space in its own right, encouraging a fruitful encounter of the author and the reader, and, in accordance with its temporality of the pastiche, having identified the past vision (the tradition of critical readings of postmodernism and Barthelme), it deconstructs it (debunks a few myths about postmodernism’s aesthetical and ethical positions, goals, and its role in its cultural and historical context) in order to creatively reconstitute it as a new insight beneficial for future scholarly engagements (ethicity in/of literary language, an interplay and tension between the ethical in language and corrective ethics, critical theory as a transitional space).

Zofia Kolbuszewska

Paweł Jędrzejko, *Melville w kontekstach, czyli prolegomena do studiów melvillistycznych. Kierunki badań – biografia – kultura* [Melville in Contexts, or, The Prolegomena to Melville Studies. Research – Biography – Culture]. Sosnowiec, Katowice, Zabrze: bananaart.pl / exmachina / m-studio, 2007. 157 pages.

Paweł Jędrzejko, *Płynność i egzystencja. Doświadczenie lądu i morza a myśl egzystencjalna Hermana Melville'a* [Liquidity and Existence. The Experience of the Land and the Sea and Herman Melville's Thought]. Sosnowiec, Katowice, Zabrze: bananaart.pl / exmachina / m-studio, 2008. 373 pages.

The presence of the great writers of the American Renaissance in the Polish critical discourse is rather unostentatious, to put it diplomatically; the discussions of the works of such men-of-letters as Poe, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, or Whitman, are scattered in journals and collections of essays and, having been written mostly in English and by specialists in English philology, they contribute to the mainstream literary studies in Poland in a very limited degree. In the 1970s, there appeared Polish books on Whitman and Poe, written by Juliusz Żuławski and Franciszek Lyra respectively, but their relevance nowadays is somewhat dubious, as they do not reflect the fundamental changes in the paradigms of American criticism in the closing decades of the twentieth century. In the United States, the discussions of diverse forms of nineteenth-century literary production, taking into account the ideological underpinnings of the process of canon formation, are among the most heated debates in the humanities. The strengthening of such theoretical models as postcolonialism and gender studies is a good incentive for American academics to offer fresh interpretations of classic texts. It is only natural that the debates on the literatures of particular nations take place in specific national contexts – historical, methodological, institutional – one should wish, however, that in the era of global communication such debates would have stronger international resonance. Hopefully, the publication of two books in Polish on Herman Melville, both authored by Paweł Jędrzejko: *Melville w kontekstach* and *Płynność i egzystencja. Doświadczenia lądu i morza a myśl Hermana Melville'a*, will inspire new interest in the American Renaissance among Polish scholars and readers.

While *Melville w kontekstach* is a historical achievement, being the first Polish book devoted exclusively to the author of *Moby Dick*, it is quite a modest contribution to Melville studies. It does not aspire to open any new ground in the field; instead, it combines a historical introduction to the writer and his epoch with a summation of the major tendencies in Melville scholarship. Such a methodological blend is slightly confusing insofar as it makes it difficult to identify the audience of *Melville w kontekstach*; on the one hand, the chapters with a biographical and historical focus seem to be addressed to less

experienced readers, who need to know the rudiments, on the other, the chapters surveying the critical approaches to Melville appeal to more specialized readers. What is evidently missing from Jędrzejko's first book is an overview of Melville's fiction, which would provide a link between the biographical and critical content. The explanation for such an omission is that the later book, *Płynność i egzystencja*, contains a thorough analysis of Melville's entire oeuvre. Unfortunately, this leaves non-academic readers at a loss: those who have been seduced by the relative easiness of *Melville w kontekstach* will probably find *Płynność i egzystencja* to be too much of an intellectual challenge.

*Płynność i egzystencja* is a full-fledged academic book, with an impressive thematic scope, clear aims and consistent methods. The point of departure in Jędrzejko's study is the assumption of the fluidity of boundaries between literature, philosophy and history, which substantiates the thesis that the work of a given writer can provide the frames of and give expression to a complex philosophical doctrine. Jędrzejko situates Melville's writing in the context of existential philosophy, defined in the broadest terms, and points to the common elements of the different historical variants of this philosophical tradition, from romantic philosophy, through French existentialism, to the psychological aspects of hermeneutics and the ethical concerns of deconstruction. Unlike those critics who blindly subjugate literary texts to interpretative models, the author of *Płynność i egzystencja* builds a dialogue between literary discourse and critical meta-discourse, invariably giving primacy to the former. Thus, he pays attention to what he calls micro-poetics; in other words, he demonstrates how symptomatic episodes in Melville's texts, or even very specific objects appearing in selected scenes, offer insights into the writer's existential philosophy. Jędrzejko discusses the significance of objects in the construction of Melville's literary universe and claims that the human sense of being is shaped in relation to the surrounding environment, which consists, precisely, of the configurations of things.

The major part of the book is devoted to Melville's heroes; the analysis of the parallels between the plights of different protagonists provides the key to the fundamental existential situation as imagined by the author of *Pierre*. This situation involves an essentially tragic dualism: on the one hand, it is determined by the fear of senselessness, which manifests itself as the inability to define the purpose of one's actions or as the incertitude of the nature of external circumstances; on the other, it requires engagement from the character and forces him to overcome the fears and to search for the purpose, in spite of doubts or against the odds. Jędrzejko describes the Melvillean protagonist, epitomizing such a human condition, with an intriguing term "oceanic man." The ocean as the metaphor of existence which is "liquid," that is devoid of unchanging meanings, points to the immensity of effort undertaken by the protagonist in order to achieve self-

reconciliation and a modicum of peace. On the narrative plane, the philosophical conception, grounded in the dichotomy of despair and engagement, takes the form of the opposition between silence and discourse, where silence is the synonym of the inexpressible – and incomprehensible – experience, while discourse aims to establish the permanent vectors of individual life and the world of phenomena through a series of linguistic acts.

In Melville's works, non-discursive experience and discursive perception converge when the characters assert their status as subjects in the narrative gestures of defining the meaning and function of objects. Jędrzejko counts detailed descriptions of objects and catalogues of things among Melville's most characteristic literary strategies. The objects which have been constructed for clearly defined purposes and which have specific names create the illusion of the stability of meanings. Objects have material and technical qualities, but they also inevitably belong to symbolic systems, such as economy, based on the arbitrary calculation of value. Accordingly, things function as signs whose meanings can be modified as a result of contextual changes. In a comprehensive chapter on the formation of selfhood in the environment of objects, Jędrzejko highlights the effect of historicity, constituted by references to the material properties of the external world.

Paweł Jędrzejko treats Melville's writing with respect and enthusiasm, and so he does the work of critics, which precludes any polemical intentions on his part. Nevertheless, *Płynność i egzystencja* departs from the dominating tendencies in Melville scholarship, the tendencies which oscillate between the reading procedures of postcolonialism, new historicism and queer studies, less often psychoanalysis and deconstruction. The examination of Melville's existential themes signifies a return to the very source of his work, a very successful return thanks to the combination of nineteenth- and twentieth-century trends in existentialism into a coherent interpretative perspective.

Marek Paryż

Lucyna Aleksandrowicz-Pędich and Jerzy Kamionowski, eds. *O wiele więcej Okien* [More numerous of Windows]. Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, 2008. 220 pages.

*O wiele więcej Okien* is the third volume in the series of essay collections on American female poets initiated and co-edited by Lucyna Aleksandrowicz-Pędich. Preceded by *W Palacu Możliwości* (2003) and *Piękniejszy Dom od Prozy* (2005) it borrows the title, like two earlier volumes, from Emily Dickinson's J657/Fr466 ("I dwell in Possibility") and contains ten meticulously annotated analyses. While some of the discussed poets

(as Elizabeth Bishop, championed by *Literatura na Świecie*) might already be known to wider circles of Polish readers, others (for instance Linda Hogan) are considerably less popular among non-English speaking audiences. Thus, while *O wiele więcej Okien* remains a valuable resource for students and researchers of poetry in English, it is an important addition to the Polish corpus of American Studies. The editors, in fact, also reach out to non-academic readers by including in the volume a chronologically arranged list of (very) short biographic notes on American female poets.

Apart from presenting a spectrum of twentieth-century American poets (from aforementioned Bishop, through Sonia Sanchez and Lucille Clifton to Jorie Graham), *O wiele więcej Okien* is a showcase of varied approaches to writing about, and quite possibly, the reading of poetry. Mikołaj Wiśniewski, in his essay on Elizabeth Bishop's *The Fish*, and Ewa Chruściel, who discusses the significance of brackets and deictic shifts in Graham's poetry, approach their subject matter with a magnifying glass, focusing closely on the minute and tracing barely discernible tensions in the tapestry of examined works. Curiously enough, in both cases it is precisely the fish – and not death of a beautiful woman – that reveals itself as the most poetical topic in the world, perfect medium and metaphor for reading, writing and looking. Commenting on Graham's speaker, who watches "minnows, thousands" that "swirl / themselves, each a miniscule muscle, but also, without / the way to *create* current, making of their unison (turning, re-infolding, / entering and exciting their own unison in unison)" (191), Chruściel observes: "In [Graham's] poems verses twirl like minnows. Glimmering they swirl, particles, corpuscles, flickers, to render [Graham's] perception of the world in *That Greater Nothing*" (193). The never-ending oscillation among the molecules of meaning, concludes Chruściel, results not in answers, but in overlapping strata of questions, and positions the meaning forever "in between."

In his delightful study Mikołaj Wiśniewski pretends to attempt to de-textualize Bishop's object and disentangle it from the layers of language, but his analysis verily emphasizes those qualities of *The Fish* (and the fish) which inevitably hint at its status of a self-reflexive verbal artifact: "Both *The Fish* and *The Monument*... eventually unveil themselves as fabricated objects," he notes pointing to the fact that "fabricated" means "constructed" and "manufactured" as well as "false, imagined" (42). Throughout his analysis Wiśniewski examines *The Fish* as carefully as Bishop's speaker examines the fish, only to let it go in the last sentence of the essay.

Other texts in *O wiele więcej Okien* preserve a more general cultural approach, proving that the notion of "female writing experience" includes a whole range of perspectives on the process of finding one's voice and voicing one's subjectivity through (and often in spite of) the matrix of socio-economic dependencies and expectations. The poetry of

two African-American poets (Sonia Sanchez and Lucille Clifton) as well as the works of Linda Hogan (who identifies herself as Native American, write the editors in the Introduction; 9) are presented against their biographical background and in each case there emerges a story of struggle and attempts at resolution, within the speaking subject and around her. Sonia Sanchez, says Jerzy Kamionowski, through her use of dialect carves out a new discourse capable of expressing experiences of the Other rejected or ignored by the dominant language (124). Linda Hogan, observes Lucyna Aleksandrowicz Pędich, creates spaces to store and restore the disappearing heritage and collective memory, while her own bi-ethnic identity becomes a symbolic battlefield and merger between that which is native and alien, natural and cultural, carnal and spiritual (187). The “ordinary woman” emerging from Ewa Łuczak’s essay on Lucille Clifton consciously chooses to avoid the logic of “either/or,” identified as traditionally non-African, in order to see more, even if only through the key-hole and without participating directly in political and social life (141). Indeed it appears that Clifton’s voice is most resonant when affirming the private and the ordinary, which by no means renders her poetry unpolitical. All of the poets, comment the editors in the Introduction (10), although each in a different way, represent “engaged subjectivity” (to use Małgorzata Poks’ description of Denise Levertov); subjectivity born from interdependencies between the blurred spheres of private and public life.

There is, in *O wiele więcej Okien*, also a place for the comparative approach: Jacek Partyka discusses the metaphysical (and Metaphysical) echoes of George Herbert’s poetry in the works of Elizabeth Bishop and Gosia Gawryś searches for parallels in the treatment of history by Bishop and Wisława Szymborska. Both essays are interesting examples of studies that succeed in mapping out connections between poets separated by a vast temporal, geographical and ideological gap.

Finally, we will find in *O wiele więcej okien* two essays reflecting on feminist sensitivity in the poetry of Anne Sexton and Edna St. Vincent Millay. Even though Sexton never considered herself a feminist, writes Piotr Zazula quoting Adrienne Rich (148), she appears to have anticipated the movement’s rebirth. Several aspects of her persona, including her celebrity status and “sexual exhibitionism”, when not forced into the (narrowly perceived) tradition of confessional poetry, jumpstart a radical revision of the notion of female spirituality. Similarly, in her analysis of selected works by Edna St. Vincent Millay, Paulina Amroży-Lis reveals how despite its traditional form and the employment all too well known stylistic tropes, Millay’s love poetry re-defines cultural conventions and paves the way for a new mode of female experience.

The volume edited by Lucyna Aleksandrowicz-Pędich and Jerzy Kamionkowski fulfills the promise foreshadowed by its title: it opens numerous windows of critical analy-

sis and inquiry. One finds oneself hoping that the remaining nine lines of Dickinson's J657/Fr466 will provide inspiration for subsequent anthologies.

Anna Warso

David Mead and Paweł Frelik, eds. *Playing the Universe. Games and Gaming in Science Fiction*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2007. 266 pages.

*Playing the Universe* is a collection of 19 essays devoted to the ideas of game and play that permeate and shape contemporary culture. While the main focus of the volume, as declared in the title, is the field of science fiction, the editors acknowledge the broader significance and veritable inevitability of "the ludic impulse" in western cultural experience. Similarly, the authors, although focused on their respective areas of research, remain aware of the pervasiveness and contextual extent of their subject matter, and a number of diverse theoretical perspectives they adopt seems to be yet another testimony to the potential that the concepts of game and play still hold for cultural studies. As a result the collection offers an astounding variety of examinations, from the discussions of classic science fiction literature and television series, through analyses of computer and role-playing games, to cross-field studies of the phenomena of games and gaming in the intermedia.

Essays included in the section devoted to literature explore the extent to which games and play serve as organizing and structuring patterns of science fiction texts, both on the narrative level and as crucial elements of imagined realities. And so David Mead presents a fascinating analysis of games in Jack Vance's fiction, arguing that they "reflect and characterize the cultures, and sometimes the people that play them" (16), and reinventing their status as formative plot devices, rather than colorful, but insignificant background elements, while Cathlena Martin and Robert O'Connor engage texts in which playing the game (or the Game as it may be) becomes the predominant mode of existence of characters and societies. O'Connor's study of Philip K. Dick's *The Game-Players of Titan* places the human "player" between the conflicting "twin horrors of mechanistic order and entropic chaos" (44), struggling to prevail in a "rigged" game. Cathlena Martin ponders the questions of childhood experience, collaboration and socialization through gaming in Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, in which the game's global consequences are masked to facilitate more natural "play." Essays by Gavin Miller and Tim Bryant similarly discuss texts where games regulate social relations (Melissa Scott's *Burning Bright*), or become a ritualized mode of expression and basis for criticism of economic relations (make-believe play in Iain Banks's "Culture" utopia).

Approaching the concept of play from another direction, Donald M. Hassler explores the speculative postmodern take on identity and post-human subject in Robert J. Sawyer's fiction, while Thomas J. Morissey and Oscar De Los Santos discuss the extrapolative (and playful) procedures that characterize discourses of both science and science fiction.

The game of Quidditch and its role in the Harry Potter novels receives treatment in essay by D. Bruno Starrs, who at the same time raises questions about cultural/social determinants of rules in real-life sports. Randy Clark's analysis of team sports in Walter R. Brooks's Freddy the Pig novels on the other hand examines the satirical potential of fantastic sporting events in children's literature.

The second section of *Playing the Universe* focuses on film and the thematic range of material presented in the three essays is equally broad. Rebecca Janicker and Lincoln Geraghty explore the nature of game-playing in two widely acclaimed television series: *Star Trek* and *Red Dwarf*. The authors analyze the differences in treatment of games between the American-made *Star Trek*, with its positive tone and healthy dose of pioneer spirit, and its humorous and yet much less optimistic British counterpart, in order to show how science fiction television presents complex moral themes in a simplified form using the medium of games and simulations.

Fred Mason's essay examines the transformation which sports undergo in science fiction films. The fictional sports of the future are more extreme, frequently life-threatening and more akin to gladiatorial combat than honorable rivalry, reflecting the growing concerns about the present state of affairs. Mason observes: "Excesses in violence in sport, in commercialization, competitiveness and fan identification with teams have all provided the germ of ideas for writers of future sports" (136).

Jonathan Goodwin's analysis of Shane Carruth's *Primer* concludes the film section of the volume. Goodwin sees sport in *Primer* as the "controlling metaphor" (141) of the film, with the two characters reinventing reality with the use of time-manipulating device and turning it into a kind of playing board upon which they compete for control. The plot of the film is extremely involved, resembling, it seems, a game governed by impossibly complex rules.

The third section of the book includes essays which explore the as yet uncharted territories of video games and tabletop games and trace the connections between this relatively new media and the science fiction narrative. Essays by Laurie Johnson and David Boreham both examine those connections, the former focused on the parallels between the emergence of computer games and the development of science fiction writing, the latter concerned with the "techno-poetics" of computer games, which can be understood as non-linear, rhizomorphic texts. Two case studies are also included in this section:

Michael Carlson Kapper's discussion of side games in *Knights of the Old Republic* video games and Michael Nitsche's examination of spatial design in *Zanzarah* adventure game. Both texts present in-depth analyses and offer fascinating insights into the particulars of computer game narratives.

Finally, Mark Gellis's essay proposes a possible reading of tabletop role-playing game supplements as literary texts. Claiming that a game supplement (or "module" as it is also called) "can be treated as a kind of deliberately open-ended and incomplete work of fiction" (167), the author discusses the functions of non-player characters, event sequencing and choices open to players on the basis of *Transhuman Space: Orbital Decay* game module by Patrick Sweeney. In addition, Gellis examines the rhetorical aspects of such texts, their potential for provoking emotional responses and for raising ethical questions.

The final section of the volume is entitled "Intermedia" and comprises two essays which present material drawn from numerous and highly diverse fields. Loren Easton examines the formation of subjectivity in a military context, using computer game experience and contemporary science fiction novel *Broken Angels* by Richard K. Morgan. Easton proposes the concept of "first person plural identity" as model for describing the subject positioned as "interface between commander's information and the material goal" (239) within modern military structure.

Jean Anne Lauer and Shelley Rodrigo's essay is a fascinating study of speculative fiction's proclivity for franchising. The authors analyze the connections between key developments in technology, film industry and corporate culture and their effects upon changes in narrative patterns of speculative fictions. Lauer and Rodrigo observe the synergy between the marketing of science fiction products across a variety of media and point to changes in modes of reception/consumption of narratives, dictated by the policy of media conglomerates.

The editors of *Playing the Universe* have done a remarkable job bringing together scholars interested in how science fiction narrative transforms and is transformed by various media. The concepts of game and play that serve as common denominators for the research presented in this collection can no doubt be found and analyzed in other types of fiction. However, as many essays in this collection show, science fiction genre has so far made the most extensive use of the idea. But then again, isn't being the vanguard what science fiction is all about?

Paweł Pyrka

