

Science fiction is concerned with the exploration of ‘inner space’ (Ballard) as well as outer space. With close reference to two of the subgenres of SF covered in this module, examine and evaluate this speculative exploration.

‘As Todorov reminds us, via the fantastic we are enabled to journey beyond limits we would otherwise not dare to cross’¹, and for decades science fiction authors have brought readers on a journey to distant, imaginary planets and through alien invasions, often avoiding the crossing and eventual destruction of the boundaries of human beings themselves. Traditionally, science fiction concerns itself with outer space, but for writers of feminist and new wave science fiction the writing ought to be directed towards the cultural landscape, and because of the internal focus of the subgenres in question, the nature of inner space will be the primary subject of our investigation. It is the boundaries that separate one individual from another which science fiction could deconstruct for, according to Ballard, ‘a literary form requires more complex ideas to sustain it’² than visions of astronauts and space travel. It may be that science fiction provides the necessary tools required to reflect the uncharted territories of our inner spaces due to its ability to imagine alternative worlds which are reflections of the authors interior self (‘to move through these landscapes is a journey of return to one’s innermost being’³). Ballard suggests that an ‘awareness that the landscapes and themes [of science fiction] are reflections of some interior reality within our minds... is a pointer to the importance of speculative fantasy’⁴. So, by disregarding its more traditional conventions, we find that:

Science fiction has begun to suggest the way to an alternative mythology, via ‘inner space’, which may possibly help to satisfy the yearning of the human spirit.⁵

To better understand this *yearning*, we must better understand both the genre which could successfully express it, and how we as readers have come to view the genre. We have come to understand modern science fiction in ‘an era shaped by structuralism and psychoanalysis’⁶ and, according to the latter, human beings strive for a unity and connection which is hindered by the stubbornly maintained image of the ‘self’ encouraged by our society. Freudian theory sees each individual initially existing ‘in a state of undifferentiation, experiencing natural self-love, unseparated and not yet distinguishing between self and other’⁷, known as the imaginary stage, which is idealised. Jacques Lacan claims that this unawareness of the limitations of self is destroyed by ‘*le stade du miroir*, the mirror stage’⁸ in which a child becomes aware of themselves as a physical entity with a set perimeter, and thus loses their connection with that around them (the ‘other’). Lacan sees the stage where people and objects are devoid of singular identification as an ‘eternal and irreducible human desire... an eternal desire for the nonrelationship of zero, where identity is meaningless’⁹. The destruction of the seamless connection a child feels between itself and others in the imaginary stage, to be replaced by a highly structured, but isolating, awareness of the self, is marked by a natural anxiety over loss, and the desire to deconstruct the boundaries imposed by the mirror stage becomes the impossible subconscious focus of the child’s existence. The eventual result of the passing of time combined with the desired absence of order would be chaos (and this chaos is reminiscent of a state of high entropy), however, upon the realisation that we can never regain such an idealised existence (the chaos), language is developed as a compensatory tool. By

using of meaningful language an individual can construct a self, and using this self they can interact with the outer world. Thus, Lecan's theory states that people long for entropy and to be at the same measure of disorder - we strive for a shared consciousness via the dissolution of the boundaries of inner space - but as this is impossible, we use meaningful language to attempt to explain our inner landscapes to an outer world, and to interact with the 'other'.

The deconstruction of individual consciousness and exploration of inner space is approached in Ursula LeGuin's critically acclaimed feminist science fiction novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*. In her novel LeGuin creates a science fictional world in which mental communication is possible and therefore, the reconnection to the inner space of others is possible. This is best demonstrated when the protagonist Genly Ai, a telepathic envoy to the alien world of Gethen, bares witness to 'foretelling'¹⁰. The process involves nine individuals mentally connecting with one another.

Two of the foretelling individuals are known as Zanies, and 'they were insane. Goss called them 'time-dividers,' which may mean schizophrenics'¹¹. The presence of the Zanies emphasises our compulsion to understand the minds of those whose thought processes are entirely different to our own. Arguably, the erratic behaviour and sounds created by the mad are their attempts to explain to others, or to make sense of, their own inner spaces, yet because their landscapes differ so significantly to our own and spoken language is insufficient to properly describe the unconscious, all of the meaning is lost. This is akin to the 'sombre half-worlds one glimpses in the paintings of schizophrenics'¹². Through 'empathic and paraverbal forces'¹³ the foretellers of Otherhord go beyond language to communicate with one another. For Jacques Lacan, language is a compensatory tool designed in an effort to re-connect to those we were each deprived of an absolute understanding of during the mirror stage. By using LeGuin's invented paraverbal communication, disregarding the spoken word and allowing each of the nine to access the innermost recesses of the individual mind (the inner space) the foretellers are able to accurately predict future events. This predictive ability is symbolic of the information and happiness that could be gained from a literal sharing of the inner space, and seems omniscient and almost divine in nature.

It is therefore surprising that, in spite of this omniscience, LeGuin implies that for all of its benefits, a shared consciousness is fraught with danger not only to the self, but to the community. Whilst the notion of a universal disorder may be 'the profoundest desire of the subject'¹⁴, done improperly it risks devastating consequences. We see that when the *question* (in my mind a representation of the journey into another mind) is too difficult to answer, the group suffers and the consequences are devastating:

At the end, all the Celibates were catatonic, the Zanies were dead, [and] the Pervert clubbed the Lord of Shorth to death with a stone.¹⁵

So, the creation of a shared inner space is not the goal of the foretellers, and the dissolution of the self may seem desirable, but it is often marked by madness or death. The solution that LeGuin creates is the foreteller's desire not to answer questions, but to actively seek the absence of them, and to maintain a degree of ignorance. The Haddarata worship the unproven, believing that 'the unknown... that is what life is based on'¹⁶ and it may be this lack of willingness that means the entropic dissolution

of inner boundaries is not a skill entirely perfected by the foretellers. But in spite of the danger, the people are not prevented from attempting to connect to one another 'as if they were the suspension-points of a spiderweb... [like] being drawn in... becoming a point or figure in the pattern'¹⁷. It is a sensation they innately desire but logically approach with trepidation, and at great personal risk each opens the proverbial doors of their inner space to investigation.

Lacan and Freud's theories are explored not only by LeGuin, but also in the new wave novel by J. G. Ballard (who coined the term 'inner space'), *The Crystal World*. The idea of a return to a previous state of being is first hinted at by Ventress, as he states 'we've all been here before'¹⁸ when referring to the chaotic crystal forest. Later, upon finding an individual who had been completely crystallised, the protagonist Sanders discovers that 'he wanted to go *back*! He wanted to go back to the forest and be crystallized again!'¹⁹ indicating an internal pull, despite the victim's pain, to be part of a collective of shared space. Ballard's crystallisation process is never properly scientifically explained, and similarly, LeGuin is ambiguous about the nature of foretelling, but the texts mirror each other in that the crystallised entities, like the foretellers, are bound by one shared state of disorder. The authors' choice to avoid complicated scientific explanation leaves little room for criticism and finding fault in theory, and we are left being lead to believe that both the foretelling and the crystals are symbolic of the wanted entropic state.

The process of crystallisation is first seen as a threatening but beautiful disaster, which later starts to incorporate human beings into its inexplicable beauty. Ballard's crystallisation transcends the boundaries of the self by physically deconstructing the borders of the individual (their flesh is transfigured so when the crystals are removed the body is ruined – 'I'd torn half of his face and chest away!'²⁰). The breaking of the flesh is symbolic of the destruction of the barriers of the inner space. The removal of these barriers is also represented by the confused distribution of time, the very laws of our empirical universe are being altered. Whilst LeGuin's foretellers gain the ability to predict the future by sacrificing their identity into part of a web, for the people of Port Matarre 'the gift of immortality [is] a direct consequence of the surrender by each of us of our own physical and temporal identities'²¹. Here we once again bare witness to the transcendent nature of a shared inner space, though instead of omniscience, the gift is immortality.

Returning momentarily to LeGuin's text, the previously mentioned fact that Genly Ai is a telepath is a mechanism written to allow the characters to access the inner space of others, specifically the members of the Ekumen, and later, Estraven. Here it seems pertinent to note that mindspeech is *not* a tactic used to improve the readers understanding of the characters, the author's narrative technique does this by itself. The story is never told from a collective viewpoint instead privileging the view of partial perspective, which presents the private thoughts of each chapter's protagonist to the reader. Interestingly, then, it could be argued that narration forms a kind of link between the mental images of the author (who sends), the character (a figment of the inner world of the author) and the mind of the reader (who receives). This notion may not have been unknown to LeGuin, who named Faxel, the leader of the active deconstruction of inner boundaries, a 'weaver'²², and it may not be coincidence that the definition of the Latin word which the word *text* originates from is *to weave words*. Faxel claims that his 'business is unlearning'²³, which suggests a conscious

desire to re-awaken the imaginary stage, hence his key position as weaver of the foretellers, and symbolises LeGuin's desire to mentally connect with others through writing, literally, *imaginary* worlds.

To communicate telepathically, Genly does not use the foretelling technique, but uses mindspeech. 'Mindspeech is communication, voluntarily sent and received',²⁴ which completely exposes the self. It allows individuals to communicate only the truths about the internal self, unhindered by compensatory language or pride. Though initially cautious about allowing Gethenian's access to his inner space, Genly offers this form of communication to two individuals he meets – Faxe and Estraven. Estraven agrees to be taught and finds Genly's words take his brother Arek's voice. If anything indicates the complexities of the private world, it is this moment.

This sharing of Estraven's inner space is a pivotal moment within the novel because throughout he has been our introduction to the idea of *shifgrethor*, which separates each individual from another via a battle of words and personal pride. This notion is not properly understood by the reader or protagonist alike ('I've made some mistake in shifgrethor. I'm sorry; I can't learn',²⁵) as it is not a custom held in our own reality, but LeGuin attempts to describe it in *Is Gender Necessary* as:

...a socially approved form of aggression called *shifgethor*, a conflict without physical violence, involving one-upmanship, the saving and loosing of face – conflict ritualized, stylized, controlled.²⁶

Genly and Estraven only 'love' one another once they have come to an understanding of the inner worlds they hold within the isolating outer world they share – LeGuin may be trying to suggest to us that, to achieve the happiness of love with another individual, we must disregard all sense of self interest, for to truly love is to eschew individuality.

Having delved into the nature of individual inner spaces, it would be remiss to assume that inner space is confined to only one individual. Mythology marks out a cultural inner-space, and as the sharing of individual identity creates such positive responses within the two aforementioned texts, the combination of cultural inner space alongside that of more personal worlds could transcend the boundaries of not only one person, but an entire culture. For obvious reasons a cultural inner space is less personal, and more easily explained, but would a glimpse into cultural space be as potentially dangerous as a view of an individual mental landscape? Within Ballard's text, the fundamental cultural space explored is Christianity, and for LeGuin it is her invented beliefs, such as the 'place inside the blizzard',²⁷ for the suicidal dead. Interestingly, both novels appear to question the foundations of the cultural inner space.

'The priest now stood alone... holding in his upraised hands a large native carving of a crucifix...the outstretched figure of the Christ embedded in a sheath of prism-like quartz',²⁸. The priest Balthus initially sees the deforming crystallisation of the image of Christ as blasphemy. The damaging of a belief so strong within the clergyman is positively offensive, and the transformation of an idea known so well by so many of a particular community (in this case the community of Christians as a whole) is

something to be angered by. Of course, at this point in the novel both reader and protagonist are unaware that the process is not a mere transformation but a kind of indoctrination into a mass, shared state. But a *cultural* inner space may be the only one of its kind in that it is an instrumental foundation for the formation of an inner world which is shared by a large group, a part of each member of the groups internal world is identically affected by their mythological beliefs. In spite of this sense of community, individuals do take personal religious belief seriously as a way to describe (or defend) themselves – entire wars have started over religion, as each side effectively aims to defend their cultural identity in the name of God.

In terms of the transformation of Christian images in *The Crystal World*, in Ballard's forest 'we see the final celebration of the Eucharist of Christ's body. Here everything is transfigured and illuminated, joined together in the last marriage of space and time'²⁹. There is a clear negotiation between personal inner space, cultural inner space and the symbols of the outer world (such as the crucifix), and all are linked together. Due to these known and frequently occurring life symbols, inner beliefs and the outer world may be better connected than we are lead to believe, and artificial barriers between the two may be, in some part, imagined. The implication is therefore as such: to form a complete connection of all varieties of inner space is to not only join with the Christ and to transcend the limitations of flesh, but to re-experience the connection and consumption of him.

This idea of inward connection to others *transcending* the self is, whilst admittedly in a limited capacity, explored by Ursula LeGuin. N. B. Hayles claims that:

Perhaps most important for our purposes, in the central relationship between Estraven and Genly Ai, the fundamental duality emerges of I and Thou, the self and the alien.³⁰

I question Hayles' use of the pronoun 'thou' being used to describe an alien and not a greater entity, and yet for Hayles 'Adam [of Genesis] was imagined as an androgynous being, made in the image of an androgynous God'³¹ so Estraven was, for Hayles, closer to a Higher Being than ourselves. From a cultural identity perspective and the implications of the pronoun 'thou' within *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the use of the phrase suggests a transcending when one enters the 'internal landscapes'³² of another. Genly describes mindspeech as a connection not between 'We and They; not I and It; but I and Thou. Not political, not pragmatic, but mystical'³³. The act of mindspeech allows the 'I' to access a superior 'Thou' which implies connection to a benevolent, omniscient reality. The people of Gethen have their own cultural belief systems, though, which are instrumental in the formation of their inner self, most notably seen in the figure of Faxel, for 'when he looked at me [Genly]... he looked at me out of a tradition thirteen thousand years old: a way of thought and way of life so old, so well established, so integral and coherent'³⁴ it shapes his very soul.

Ultimately, by using the theories of Freud and Lecan we have been able to observe how the science fictional novels of Ursula LeGuin and J. G. Ballard use the exploration of the inner recesses of the human mind (rather than the more traditional investigation of outer space) to attempt to recreate the lost imaginary phase where all

things are connected by the dissolution of the self. We have witnessed both the transcendent, almost holy nature of the destruction of personal boundaries via mindspeech and crystallisation, and simultaneously, the devastating consequences of a shared subconscious, as presented by the Otherworld foretellers. By approaching the notion of not only individual inner spaces, but a more common, cultural inner landscape, we can consider the effect a cultural inner space would have upon the sense of 'self' (Faxe's personality was entirely dependant upon his traditions, and the Priest Balthus was furious at the transformation of an external symbol of his cultural inner self).

In the end, Ballard presents the sharing of the inner space as a desired condition, and makes the process of entropy beautiful. In *The Crystal World*, the exploration of inner space is to be encouraged. However, this conclusion sits less comfortably for LeGuin. The contradictions within *The Left Hand of Darkness* between shared transcendence and shared disaster, proud shifgrethor and mindspeech which accesses your most vulnerable private world, do not allow the authors intent to be fully realised. But for as long as we are uncertain of LeGuin's intent in our investigation, we are focused upon one, eternal question – what is going on inside the author's mind?

¹ Armitt, Lucy, *Theorising the Fantastic*, London: Arnold, 1996, p. 97

² Ballard, J. G., 'Which Way To Inner Space', *A User's Guide to the Millennium*, London: Flamingo, 1997, p. 196

³ Ballard, J. G., *The Coming of the Unconscious*, Available Online:
http://www.jgballard.ca/non_fiction/jgb_reviews_surrealism.html Accessed: 22/03/2011

⁴ Ballard, J. G., *Time, Memory and Inner Space*, Available Online:
http://www.jgballard.ca/non_fiction/jgb_time_memory_innerspace.html Accessed: 20/03/2011

⁵ Ash, Brian, *Faces of the Future*, London: Elek Books Ltd, 1975, p. 83

⁶ Broderick, Damien, *Reading by Starlight*, London: Routledge, 1995, p. 8

⁷ Jackson, Rosemary, *Fantasy The Literature of Subversion*, London: Routledge, 1981, p. 88

⁸ Jackson, Rosemary, p. 88

⁹ Jackson, Rosemary, p. 77

¹⁰ LeGuin, Ursula, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Great Britain: Orbit, 1992, p. 47

¹¹ LeGuin, Ursula, p. 50-51

¹² Ballard, J. G., 'Which Way To Inner Space', *A User's Guide to the Millennium*, London: Flamingo, 1997, p. 198

¹³ LeGuin, Ursula, p. 53

¹⁴ Jackson, Rosemary, p. 77

¹⁵ LeGuin, Ursula, p. 49

¹⁶ LeGuin, Ursula, p. 57

¹⁷ LeGuin, Ursula, p. 52-53

¹⁸ Ballard, J. G., *The Crystal World*, London: Harper Perennial, 2008, p. 88

¹⁹ Ballard, J. G., p. 122

²⁰ Ballard, J. G., p. 122

²¹ Ballard, J. G., p. 169

²² LeGuin, Ursula, p. 47

²³ LeGuin, Ursula, p. 55

²⁴ LeGuin, Ursula, p. 55

²⁵ LeGuin, Ursula, p. 202

²⁶ LeGuin, Ursula, 'Is Gender Necessary?', *The Language of the Night*, Great Britain: Putnam Adult, 1979, p. 140

²⁷ LeGuin, Ursula, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Great Britain: Orbit, 1992, p. 18

²⁸ Ballard, J. G., p. 34

²⁹ Ballard, J. G., p. 162

³⁰ Hayles, N. B., 'Androgyny, Ambivalence, and Assimilation', *Writers of the 21st Century Series* Ursula K. LeGuin, ed. Joseph D. Olander and Martin Harry Greenberg, Edinburgh: Paul Harris Publishing, 1979, p. 100

³¹ Hayles, N. B., p. 98

³² Ballard, J. G., *Time, Memory and Inner Space*, Available Online:

http://www.jgballard.ca/non_fiction/jgb_time_memory_innerspace.html Accessed: 07/04/2011

³³ LeGuin, Ursula, p. 211

³⁴ LeGuin, Ursula, p. 57