

Ursula K. Heise. “Science Fiction and the Time Scales of the Anthropocene.” *ELH*, 86. 2 (2019): 275-304.

As the novel was on its cultural ascent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, questions about its value were focused on technique and moral meaning. Into the twentieth century, as the novel began to compete with other media, literary contemplations became focused instead on genre, style, and rote criticism. And now, as the human epoch fully shifts into the so-called period of the Anthropocene, the scholarly questions posed by literature departments across the academic spectrum come from an existential suspicion decades in the making: if the novel is to not fall into obsolescence (and threaten the scholarly *raison d'être* of humanities faculty in literature departments worldwide), how can narratives stay relevant?

Though never explicitly stated in these terms, this is the fundamental question of Heise’s essay on science fiction and creative culture, now sublimated by the multifarious and heretofore unimagined time scales of the Anthropocene era. As Heise writes, “the Anthropocene forces us to consider human society and the conditions that have enabled its survival in the past over long time spans, as well as to assess impacts that may last hundreds, thousands, or even tens of thousands of years into the future” (277). Contemporary literature that fails to account for “human temporality” at any scale – “of a human history that has generated multiple inequalities between humans, on the scale of a humanity that has become an agent as a species, and on the scale of geological power that transforms the planet’s physical nature” (278) – has already put itself on the path towards obsolescence.

The demands of using the Anthropocene as an analytic concept necessitate both a historical-geological awareness as well as the acceptance of a core socio-political proposition: that humans are where we are in the world through those actions that we ourselves have taken – and both civilization and the planet are the literal and proverbial “sinks” for these decisions. Thus, it is not a coincidence that the existential suspicions about the novel have been coeval with philosophies of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene therefore demands creative imagination, and as such, Heise’s asks: “If the Anthropocene indeed calls for a scaling-up of the imagination, how much might that imagination translate into narrative?” (279). The insights required for this translation “actually lie in narrative forms that preceded the rise of the novel and have accompanied it throughout its history” (279).

Heise divides current critical conceptualizations of scale into three camps: those focused on “the broadening of canons” (i.e., how scholars define what constitutes “literature”); those scales that are brought into dimension through “the use of digital tools” (i.e., data analysis, machine learning, artificial intelligence, etc.); and the way the narrative forms themselves “engage with large scales of space and time” (275). After a quick summary of the first two forms of scale, Heise focuses on the narratives themselves and suggests that the literature of science fiction has always been better equipped to deal with the challenges of scale, particularly because it was thinking in these scales well before the Anthropocene became *de rigueur*.

Referencing H.G. Wells, Sheri S. Tepper, Neal Stephenson, Isaac Asimov, Olaf Stapledon, Dorris Lessing, and others, Heise surveys five basic narrative strategies employed by these and other “genre” writers to manage massive scales of space and time: time travel; time leaps and serial protagonism; species narratives; time collages; and time palimpsests. Each strategy has its own advantages and shortcomings, but Heise is less focused on instruction than in demonstrating how “science fiction has developed a variety of techniques over the last century for addressing the anisochrony that deep-time narrative entails” (299).

For Heise, following Gérard Genette in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, anisochrony is the key narrative challenge of the Anthropocene, insofar as it describes “the difference between the duration of the narrated events and the duration of the narration itself” (284). Just as the Anthropocene outlines a geological shock on the planet, brought about by human activity, it contains within itself a similar philosophical shock: I’m a product of a hundred thousand years of human evolution, how am I to adequately receive (and if I’m lucky, understand) that narrative?

Recognizing this complication – at least for how it plays out in literature – Heise concludes that changes in our analytical structures brought about by the Anthropocene era “imply that the new forms of epic will require different readerly work and generate different readerly pleasures than realist and modernist novels” (301). After that, she ends with a provocation, which would likely be more important than this essay itself: to scale up our imagination in narrative design, we need to rediscover how (and perhaps why) it became scaled down in the first place.

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