

Review: Discretion and Common Sense

Reviewed Work(s): Deconstructing the Starships: Science, Fiction and Reality by Gwyneth Jones

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BOOKS IN REVIEW

Discretion and Common Sense. Gwyneth Jones. *Deconstructing the Starships: Science, Fiction and Reality*. Liverpool UP, 1999. vii + 221 pp. £27.50 hc; £11.95 pbk.

Gwyneth Jones is one of the two or three most important writers of the current sf boom in the UK, and a highly regarded exponent of recent feminist sf. *Deconstructing the Starships* collects articles, papers, and reviews she has produced between 1986 and 1997. From the evidence in this book, it is clear she is also one of the most reflective and readable sf critics working today.

Jones is a fiction writer first, and her criticism is mainly occasional. *DtS* is divided into three sections, each ostensibly in a different critical medium. The first, "All Science is Description," includes four pieces commissioned by various institutions, from British Telecom to the C.S. Lewis Society, between 1986 and 1994. "Science, Fiction and Reality" follows with papers delivered over the next three years at various low-key British sf conferences. The final section gathers Jones's reviews from *Foundation*, *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, and *SF Eye*, journals all known for freewheeling criticism by practicing writers. The papers and essays are presented in chronological order, as are the reviews, so the message seems to be that *DtS* is a record of the development of an important writer's marginal commentary.

Nothing in the titles or the order would lead one to think that Jones or Liverpool University Press considers the work particularly noteworthy as theory or social commentary. The essays all have the kind of titles expected from writers—"The Lady and the Scientists," "My Crazy Uncles: C.S. Lewis and Tolkien as Writers for Children," "Sex: The Brains of Female Hyena Twins," "Aliens in the Fourth Dimension"—that promise imaginative farfetching, in which disciplined argument is not required. Even the book's wryly cute cover seems to say so: stenciled over a starscape is a simple instructional diagram for gluing together one of those plastic Revell or Aurora models of a toy spaceship, as if to say, herein the visions of sf are revealed to be toy constructions in a real cosmos. There is little effort made to present Jones as a feminist critic, let alone a major one, or an admired sf personality. A sort of discreet British diffidence pervades the project; not even the lengthy back-cover blurb refers to Jones as anything more than "a practicing SF writer." Perhaps Liverpool UP expects its prospective buyers to know exactly who Gwyneth Jones is and what she has written. Still, I find it puzzling why this valuable book seems intended to float in the critical void, like the unassembled toy model on its cover.

The modesty is misplaced. These essays deserve much wider exposure and enthusiasm. To begin with, the divisions are uninspired, and misleading, since the various writings are much more closely linked than they appear. Although it makes some sense to isolate the reviews, Jones often uses the form as an occasion for more comprehensive essays. Indeed, some of the reviews complement the essays/papers so neatly that by arranging all the pieces together in chronological order, perhaps with a comprehensive conclusion, *DtS* would

be revealed overtly to be what it is now only implicitly: a valuable critical history of recent feminist sf equal to Jenny Wolmark's *Aliens and Others: Science Fiction, Feminism, and Postmodernism* (U Iowa P, 1994) and Sarah Lefanu's *In the Chinks in the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction* (Women's Press, 1988).

The title, too, misleads. Jones does not strive to be an original theorist, and her references to deconstruction are only occasional and somewhat idiosyncratic. She takes positions that are not unfamiliar to most students of sf criticism: that sf is not about the future, but the present; that sf is a paradoxical genre, combining techniques of realism ("deep décor"), game-like translations of sf displacements into their real-world analogues, and a tactical "mixture of convention, sleight of hand and cynical trickery, with a 'best-by' date that makes the whole thing absurd stamped all the way through" (16); that sf "is the only fiction about the present, everything else is historical romance" (vii); that sf is a jerry-built mishmash of confidence-tricks, and also a "precious conduit between the human world and the strange cosmos we inhabit" (21). The 1987 essay "Getting Rid of the Brand Names" elegantly describes the genre, without any pedantic allusiveness to the dominant theories, yet representing them fully. Sf writers are nowadays routinely expected to provide some definition or justification for their chosen form. Jones's is exemplary, but it is in no way original. What *is* original is Jones's indirect and discreet reconstruction of contemporary sf from the perspective of feminism—a construction so discreet that it becomes evident only when all the pieces of the mosaic have been put in place.

I have to confess that I have always found Jones's style puzzlingly cool and restrained for an sf writer. Maybe it's a British thing. Never pushing a sentence beyond its point, rarely reveling in the materiality of her words or the twist of her metaphors, she has little use for the sublime. It is evident that she is versed in technical-scientific and critical language, but she prefers not to use it. Ursula Le Guin writes for concreteness. Samuel Delany writes for intellectual display. John Clute writes for the pleasurable excess. Jones, it seems, writes only for the *not juste*. Even when she conjures up intimate moments from her past—reading to her young son, or her own reading as a sickly child (in the fine critical memoir on Lewis and Tolkien)—she has the markedly British voice of a highly educated, analytical, philo-scientific reasoner, quick with the wry aside and the parenthetical insight. A blurb for Eleanor Arnason's *Ring of Swords* (1993) calls it a mingling of *Star Trek* and Jane Austen. I'm not sure that's accurate for Arnason's masterpiece (I have a hard time imagining Jane Austen writing about homosexual wookies in *any* universe), but something like it may work for Jones. Or perhaps, rather than Austen, try the Woolf of *A Room of One's Own* (1929) for the same restrained, ironic address to a university-educated audience deeply invested in masculine values, reserving for herself the right to demolish any sacred icon of the hegemonic order, but unwilling to get in anyone's face.

Similarly, it was not obvious to me before reading *DtS* why Jones should be considered a particularly feminist writer. The central novum of her major work, the Aleutian trilogy—*White Queen* (1991), *North Wind* (1994), and *Phoenix*

Café (1996)—are humanoid extraterrestrial operators who arrive on earth to do a little real-estate dealing, who are granted, much to their surprise, fearful dominance by a human species into whose myths of alien superiority they have dropped unawares. The situation could have been howlingly comic or satirical, if Jones had not constructed the aliens as complex subjects, with physiology, social intercourse, and culture radically different from human beings'. Humans and aliens find each other irresistibly interesting and incomprehensible. Their relationships lead to grotesque adaptations on almost every level of existence. All the interlocking dualities that form human culture—male/female, master/servant, organism/technology, empathy/scientific rationality, mind/body—must be re-skewed to understand the Aleutians, and the Aleutians' own sacred categories have to be revised in turn. True, at the time of the Aleutians' arrival, humans are engaged in a global gender war; but this is not a matter of biological men against women, but rather a conflict of ideologies. In short, the scene is hardly the sort of focused tendentious drama one expects from political fiction. The feminism of the Aleutian novels used to strike me as more the common-sense of a woman surveying the state of contemporary gender relations than a polemically heightened elaboration of principles.

For me, consequently, the most important essay of *DtS* is the literally central "Aliens in the Fourth Dimension," in which Jones explains the ideas that led to the Aleutians. As Jones tells it, her aliens emerged from a rigorous process of association and transformation of ideas. Beginning with a parallel between colonial adventure and the battle of the sexes, Jones decided to construct aliens who would be colonial victors while embodying the characteristics usually associated with subject peoples.

I planned to give my alien conquerors the characteristics, all the supposed deficits that Europeans came to see in their subject races in darkest Africa and the mystic East—"animal" nature, irrationality, intuition; mechanical incompetence, indifference to time, helpless aversion to theory and measurement; and I planned to have them win the territorial battle this time. It was no coincidence, for my purposes, that the same list of qualities or deficiencies—a nature closer to the animal, intuitive communication skills and all the rest of it—were and still are routinely awarded to *women*, the defeated natives, supplanted rulers of men, in cultures north and south, east and west, white and non-white, the human world over. (110)

In the process, Jones created physical and cultural manifestations of the putative character essences—i.e., she experimented with beings who truly do have the essential and inviolable species differences attributed to half of the human race (aversion to spoken language and non-organic technologies, collective consciousness, romantic desire for fusion, etc.). Given this systematic construction of alterity, it is striking that even these creatures of essential difference manifest the mixed motives, ethical confusion, and ambivalent drive to mix with the other that humans do. The self-other relation, in terms of gender, culture, or even species, is never simple, never resolved. Negotiations must continue always.

This point of view pervades all of Jones's writings in *DtS*. As Jones sees it,

the sf of the '80s and '90s has reached a critical juncture, best represented by the respective trajectories of cyberpunk and feminist sf. Several essays and reviews take on the subject of cyberpunk. "Fools: The Neuroscience of Cyberspace" begins as a tracing of the historical relationship between computational technology in the real world and its representation in sf. Jones makes her approach down two paths. She describes, on the one hand, Gerald Edelson's "Neural Darwinism," the Theory of Neuronal Group Selection that uses the model of population dynamics for the development of complex neural pathways and associations, and, on the other hand, the science fictional appropriation of neuroscience into the social mythology of c-punk. In the latter, particularly in the work of Gibson, Jones describes the transformation of cyberspace from "that sparse and chilling Cartesian space" into "a kind of electronically generated Narnia" (83). The culmination of this dual trajectory is Pat Cadigan's movement into the interior, applying the decentering implications of neuroscience's demolition of the ego-subject to the most personal ideas of identity and diversity. Although in Cadigan, according to Jones, the mind of cyberspace is still male,

yet the dissolution of the paranoid Overmind model in *Synners*, the constantly disrupted and recovered boundaries of the self and not-self in *Fools*, seem inescapably a political, and even a feminist progress, reflecting the decentered modes of thought—ecologies, evolutions, diversities; populations instead of individuals, groups instead of single interests, which are infiltrating all our current models of the world. (89)

Jones is more kind to cyberpunk than most feminist critics. Her defense of Cadigan as a feminist writer may not be unusual, but she is also unusually sympathetic to Gibson, in whom she detects a "closet softie" (in her review "*Virtual Light: A Shocking Dose of Comfort and Joy from William Gibson*"). Jones is the only other critic, in my experience, who sees what I consider one of Gibson's dominant positive traits as a writer: his sense of pity for his characters, and grief for the ruined world they must inhabit. By extension, in "Trouble: Living in the Machine," Jones interprets the hatred of and disgust for "the meat" that occurs so often in cyberpunk writing in terms of a desperate pity: "In the cyberpunk future, which is so uncomfortably slight an extrapolation from our present, maybe we have to choose to hate the living world, starting with its most intimate manifestation, our own living bodies. It would be too painful otherwise, to watch the creature die" (94).

A pattern develops. On the one hand, there is the ethical collapse of the adolescent, technophile male universe, typified by Neal Stephenson's 1995 novel *Snow Crash* (roasted in a hilarious review, "The Boys Want to Be With the Boys: Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*"), as that world evolves into a world-machine. On the other hand, there are the pangs of a feminist sf enmeshed in problems of its own. Jones traces the history of the latter in several of the reviews and essays in *DtS*. In an early essay from 1987, "The Lady and the Scientists," Jones is at her most polemical, directing her criticism mainly against the "the cant of gender nationalism ... revenge fantasies, and fifth

columnist disinformation" (31) that comes to dominate feminist theory in the '80s. She defends the work of Russ, Atwood, Charnas, Tiptree, and Le Guin for their recognition of the obstacles real women face in the world; yet even they are found wanting for siding with those who believe that human nature cannot change. For Jones, feminist sf must represent a world in which women can take responsibility for changing the future; consequently they must imagine a future in which "testosterone drives have been ... substantially demoted" (33), but where the genders can live together.

This argument appears again and again in different forms throughout *DtS* in closer studies of feminist writers. Jones uses reviews of Sheri S. Tepper's work to demolish simplistic gender essentialism. In a complementary (and much more respectful) review of Suzy McKee Charnas's *The Furies* (1995), Jones demolishes the opposite fatalism, that gender differences make no difference when it comes to human violence and revenge-drives. In the concluding review-essay "No Man's Land: Feminised Landscapes in the Utopian Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin," Jones traces the whole dialectic of feminist sf through Le Guin's oeuvre: from the view of women's inherent positivity, in the early novels and *Always Coming Home* (1985), to the antithetical/complementary representation of women in a male culture as having no role but to do the domestic work (e.g., Takver in *The Dispossessed* [1975]), to their disappearance altogether in scientific romance (in *The Left Hand of Darkness* [1969]), where their role is absorbed into the landscape. In Le Guin's story "Sur" (1982), however, Jones finds an inspiring opening. The account of an imaginary Antarctic exploration by a team of women that discovers the pole and yet refuses to publicize it gives Jones a model for feminist sf: the construction of an open imaginary space, a "No Man's Land, which means to create more mind, means going into the Ice and leaving the soft south behind" (208). This No Man's Land of "Sur"'s Ice, "an empty place on the map," is Jones's objective correlative for sf's feminist project, and its deep connection with deconstruction, the philosophy of the empty space.

Despite this desire for an Anti-Sur, it is hard to imagine Jones, especially the Jones of *DtS*, separating female protagonists into an empty zone, even for a brief expedition. Jones's writing, critical awareness, and feminism are all nurtured by direct engagement with whatever the given orthodoxy wishes to exclude. Her conception of deconstruction is, ultimately, not of a *mise-en-abîme*, but of a superabundance of meaning:

Deconstruction is, if essentialist terminology cannot be ignored, a markedly *feminine* activity of curiosity, greed, gossip, insatiable pursuit of secret details; the reckless, inquisitive adventure of Pandora or Bluebeard's last bride. Its project is to bring us *more*, not less, from any text or any genre template: more information, more implications, more possibilities; to expand consciousness, not to limit it. Viewed in these terms, science fiction comes out well, capable of sustaining any critical audit, and of containing all transformations and explorations: even to the farthest distant pole of feminist revolution. (130)

For all its inherent discretion, this volume offers a bracing vision of the field.—ICR