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# Posthumanist *Novum* and Cognitive Estrangement in Philip Reeve's *Railhead Trilogy*

**Abstract:** This paper explores the relationship between technological *novum*, estrangement, and cognition in Philip Reeve's *Railhead* trilogy. Set in a futuristic world governed by AI, the trilogy features humans, drones, and androids traveling across the galaxy with sentient trains. Building on Darko Suvin's (1979) theory of alternative worlds in science fiction, which posits that such worlds are created through the defamiliarization of empirical material from the real world, this paper will analyze the posthumanist and ecocritical conditions of Reeve's world-building. Specifically, these strategies generate cognitive estrangement concerning the relationship between technology and the human/non-human environments.
**Keywords**: Philip Reeve; *Railhead*; Cognitive Estrangement; Posthumanist *Novum*; Science Fiction; YA Literature.

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DOI: 10.24193/cechinox.2025.49.04

## Introduction: Science Fiction and the Socio-Cultural Logic of Capitalist Realism

In recent decades, science fiction and fantasy genres have been explored from the perspective of ideological, narratological, and transmedial articulations that have provided various world-building strategies[1]. Viewed in relation to the global political and economic system, much of contemporary science fiction reflects the socio-cultural logic of the real world shaped by the effects of current capitalism, to which it can generate no systemic alternative. According to Mark Fisher, capitalist realism defines "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it"[2]. Moreover, "capitalist realism cannot be confined to art or to the quasi-propagandistic way in which advertising functions. It is more like a pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting

as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action"[3].

Given these two definitions of capitalist realism understood as an intensification of the principles underlying late capitalism, we can generalize the idea that capitalist realism represents the ideological and cognitive material that contemporary science fiction and fantasy literature defamiliarizes, in order to create secondary worlds that internalize this socio-cultural logic. As described by Fisher, capitalist realism is not a literary genre, but an atmosphere or a socio-cultural *Weltanschauung* that becomes the source of building secondary worlds in fantasy and science fiction literature. According to Fredric Jameson, postmodernism was the socio-cultural logic of late capitalism[4]. Thus, contemporary literature can be interpreted as the socio-cultural logic of capitalist realism, as a new stage in the evolution of capitalism.

On the other hand, in Robert T. Tally Jr.'s view, the role of contemporary literature and theory is to generate a creative *critique* in the context of capitalist realism, precisely by destabilizing and defamiliarizing the socio-cultural settings specific to the real world[5]. Philip Reeve's *Railhead* trilogy is a perfect example of this. It is a work of literature that creates cognitive estrangement by highlighting the possibilities of biotechnological advancement and exploring a future based on positive human-machine interaction. More specifically, the novels describe an AI-governed futuristic world where humans and various types of drones and androids travel with sentient trains all across the galaxy. The two protagonists, Zen Starling and his android (girl)friend Nova, go through a series of adventures that bring them in contact with a series of remarkably diverse characters and that, ultimately, help them create a world-order in which humans collaborate with the living railway system in order to expand their cultural and commercial relations with as many other races as possible.

The novels discuss some of the most pressing issues of our contemporary society as well: what does it mean to be human, how or whether can technical artefacts share this quality, how is gender a socially constructed concept, what would heteronormativity's relevance be in a technoscientific, AI-powered society etc. It is essential that Philip Reeve shows the YA audience a world where a new generation of self-developed humanity is trying to peacefully cohabit the universe with and under the surveillance of its very own technological production. The trilogy is thus demonstrative for a worldview in which we should both embrace such a future and open our minds to the possibilities that a sustainable evolution of the human-machine relationship would bring along.

## Building Fantastical Capitalism in Reeve's *Railhead* Trilogy

Before investigating the poetics and epistemology of the *Railhead* trilogy, we must define the focus of our investigation. First, we will conduct an ideological and structural analysis integrating the trans- and posthuman chronotopic content of the novels while mapping the contemporary world system. Furthermore, our analysis aims to reveal the role of science fiction literature with regard to the geopolitical and economic transformations produced by capitalism within the context of global society.

In *Fantasy and Mimesis*, Kathryne Hume reveals the processual nature and poetics of fiction as a product of mimetic and fantastic techniques by exploring the dialectical relationship between the genesis of literary texts and socio-cultural contexts[6]. She focuses specifically on the interaction between the worlds of writers, the fictional universes they create, and the worlds of readers. For instance, within what Hume identifies as "exclusive definitions" of the literary production of the fantastic ("exclusive" since they emphasize the separation of fantastic genres from mimetic ones, rather than their formal coexistence), the author provides examples such as Darko Suvin's theory[7] about the dimensions of the science fiction genre, as well as those of J. R. R. Tolkien (from the essay "On Fairy-Stories"[8]) and Rosemary Jackson (from *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*[9]) on the configurations and functions of the fantasy genre. In Hume's view, all these theories illustrate how science fiction and fantasy writers process the empirical, epistemological, affective, and cognitive material specific to their reality (often through a "negative relationality", in Jackson's terms), with the aim of creating alternative worlds (or "subcreations", in Tolkien's understanding), which generate different socio-cultural (counter-)reactions in readers (or various forms of "cognitive estrangement", according to Suvin) in relation to the world they live in.

In the context of these ideological and socio-cultural articulations, Suvin's theory on *scientific novum* and *cognitive estrangement* is relevant to science fiction poetics that reflect the capitalist world system. Scientific novum is defined here in terms of trans- and posthumanist philosophy and *Weltanschauung*, while cognitive estrangement is understood as a process of defamiliarizing the worlds of the author and the readers. According to Darko Suvin, "if the novum is the necessary condition of SF (differentiating it from naturalistic fiction), the validation of the novelty by scientifically methodical cognition into which the reader is inexorably led is the sufficient condition for sf"[10]. As a literary praxis that produces scientific novum and cognitive defamiliarization, science fiction is "a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment"[11]. This world-building process, which is based on generating cognitive estrangement, can be linked to the subversive function against hegemonic structures that Rosemary Jackson identified in secondary worlds created in fantasy literature.

Such theoretical investigations demonstrate that science fiction is ideologically anchored in the depiction of the unique tensions of the primary worlds it makes unfamiliar. From this perspective, considering the dynamics of the global economic system, contemporary science fiction is indicative of what Dan Hassler-Forest defines as fantastical capitalism. It describes an internalized, fictional form of capitalist realism, as theorized by Mark Fisher. The idealism and utopianism that distinguish classical science fiction and fantasy are impossible in the context of fantastical capitalism, because we can no longer imagine different – or better – alternatives to the socio-political systems of fictional worlds constructed within the ideological framework of capitalist

realism. Hassler-Forest clearly nuances this socio-cultural logic:

> as capitalist realism has become more deeply ingrained in our culture, fantastic fiction has absorbed the cynical politics of neoliberalism, structuring fantasies that no longer flee from, but fully embrace, capitalism's 'naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.' *Fantastical capitalism* seems an appropriate term to describe fantastical storyworlds that give narrative and aesthetic expression to Empire's spirit of capitalist realism: 'fantastical' because – superficially at least – they present us with storyworlds totally unlike our own, and 'capitalism' because they incorporate and strengthen capitalism's most basic social and cultural logic, while alternatives are systematically rejected as 'unrealistic'[12].

The *Railhead* trilogy coherently assimilates the paradigm of fantastic capitalism through its chronotopic construction, which defamiliarizes the global economic system:

> Network Empire – The Empire is a revival of an ancient form of government from Old Earth. A single human being is chosen to be the ruler of the Network. The Emperor or Empress has little real power, since they are watched over by the Guardians, who will intervene to stop them from doing anything that is likely to cause instability. Their purpose is to act as a symbolic link between the Guardians and humanity, and to ensure that the Corporate Families and the representatives of the different stations and cities of the Network meet to negotiate their differences in the Imperial Senate rather than fighting. However, the Guardians have never objected to an Emperor advancing his own power and interests, ensuring that the family of the current Emperor or Empress is usually the most powerful of the Corporate Families[13].

As the major chronotope of the trilogy, the Network Empire is not a post-ideological construct provided by neutral rhetoric in a fantastic regime. Rather, it critically internalizes the symptomatology of capitalist realism, as Hassler-Forest aptly points out: "in the same way that there is no such thing as a neutral, commonsense social reality that isn't already steeped in ideology, the seemingly post-ideological worlds of fantastical capitalism should instead be considered – to use a clichéd but appropriate Žižekianism – as an example of ideology at its purest"[14]. On the other hand, the chronotopic infrastructures of the trilogy (such as the Corporate Families imposing a form of capitalist imperialism, the living railway system, the moon Ambersai as an industrial settlement with the largest marketplace in the region, the Ambersai Bazar) are essential to the fantastic capitalism instrumented by Philip Reeve, which achieves social criticism by presenting the relationship between *posthumanist novum* and cognitive estrangement.

## Post- and Transhumanist Tropes

For a better understanding of Reeve's universe and his take on humans' relationship with the technology of the future,

it is also helpful to consider the post- and transhumanist tropes present in the *Railhead* trilogy. For Cary Wolfe, "posthumanism names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore"[15]. At the same time, Rosi Braidotti argues that posthumanism "marks the end of the opposition between Humanism and anti-humanism and traces a different discursive framework, [...] [working] instead towards elaborating alternative ways of conceptualizing the human subject"[16]. In this light, transhumanism's aim is that of improving the quality and duration of humans' life, as well as their intellectual, physical, and emotional capacities. At the center of this programmatic evolution towards immortality lies the "post-human", understood by Joel Garreau as a category of people whose abilities so radically surpass those of present-day humans that they can no longer be fitted into the current standards that define membership of this species[17].

As a result, this transition towards the "'next' stage of the posthuman"[18] is also closely connected to changing one's attitude towards the body, which could now be freed from its biological and cultural limits. In her book on *Philosophical Posthumanism*, Francesca Ferrando no longer perceives the body as subject to that Cartesian dualism where it was given an inferior role respective to the mind, but places it within a discourse of constant development, where fluidity becomes central. What transhumanism is set to achieve, with the help of progressively more advanced forms of technology, is a future where bodies would function as projections of the mind and personality of each person: changing their shape, composition, and appearance according to the desires and needs of their possessor, they would be able to exist even in a virtual form[19].

If we look at Reeve's novels, we can see that the bodies of his characters (human or machine) are indeed constructed, to various degrees, according to Ferrando's characteristics of transhuman bodies. On the one hand, the human characters are still very attached to the idea of being given a unique body and they change only their eye and hair color, while also adding designs to their skin according to the latest fashion. On the other hand, for the "guardians", the gods of Reeve's fictional universe[20], a plural existence comes naturally: they are AI's who exist only in the Datasea (which is the name given to their "massive information system made from the interlinked internets of all the inhabited worlds"[21]) and who download themselves into all sorts of bodies when they want to interact with humans. Sfax Systema, for instance, usually chooses to appear as a human-shaped cloud of blue butterflies, while the avatar of Shiguri Monad looks like "a peacock with a thousand actual eyes on its billowing tail"[22]. Anais Six's preferred interface, however, is "three meters tall, [has] blue skin, masses of red hair, wide golden antlers, [...] [and] a gown made from the feathers of rare, expensive birds"[23]. Reeve's choice of equating the divinities of his fictional world with different systems of artificial intelligence echoes N. Katherine Hayles' idea according to which information freed "from the material constraints that govern the mortal world" could actually become the path towards achieving immortality[24].

But Reeve's complex world-building in terms of bio-technological corporeality

actually goes on and on, describing species of aliens which are „so far outside [the humans'] frame of reference that [their] brain refused to take them in"[25]. Some of the races with whom Zen and Nova interact during their travels are the Hive Monks (religious colonies of bugs which are kept together by a kind of simple intelligence and which mimic the shape of human beings[26]), the Herastec (antelope-looking mammals with 3 feet and one hand, who always come in pairs and who wear black glass masks through which they can stream everything they see and think to their partner[27]), the Kraitt (a race of reptilian predators – man sized lizards – which is the only violent race from the Web of Worlds, apart from the humans[28]), or the Hath ("gentle beings whose long, stick-legs support thin sheets of folded membrane" and who have mouths on their legs for filtering food from the water around which they live[29]).

## Heterotopian Infrastructures of Connectivity and Subversion

The negotiation between humanity's current relation with its racial and sexual "other" and a future, better alternative of this relation is also instrumented by Reeve through highlighting a mostly positive interaction between the alien races of the Web of Worlds, humans, and machines. At the end of the 1990s, Rosalind W. Picard has called for a change in regards to how computers are made, arguing that they should be built with integrated affective abilities in order to prevent the dehumanization of their users, who would soon be surrounded almost exclusively by such machines[30]. Likewise, almost two decades later, Peter Kroes and Peter-Paul Verbeek have debated whether objects have moved past the condition of passive instruments and could now be seen as technical artefacts with a moral status, which can influence their users and the ways in which they see the world and act within it[31]. As a consequence of this shift in how material things are perceived, one can rightfully wonder what does it mean to be human nowadays and whether this quality is reserved only to humans.

Philip Reeve's answer to these questions is a categorical "No", as machines of all kinds are given various human(e) characteristics in his novels. Trains, for example, are sentient, anthropomorphized entities with names and distinct personalities which not only interact with their passengers, but also have dreams of their own, friendships and preferences about what drawings to be painted on them: "Each train has a brain; a mind of its own, housed in the sleek-hulled locomotive. The locos are born in the trainworks of the Corporate Families, but once their minds come online they stop being mere vehicles and become individuals, intelligent and self-aware"[32]. Moreover, their role within the Great Network is far greater than that of ordinary vehicles too: they are the only ones able to pass through the K-gates[33] and thus carry information from world to world, making everyone from humans to guardians (who, as AI systems, are exclusively made of information) dependent on their movement and cooperation. In fact, the whole railway system is built with the purpose of spreading information through the Datasea and across the galaxy, a fact that gives these technical artefacts the central role of keeping the entire Network running and of connecting all the worlds like umbilical cords.

As a consequence, the relationship between people and their gods is also questioned in the trilogy: if the series started with the guardians being portrayed as omniscient deities safeguarding humanity, the protagonists slowly reveal their fallible nature. Reeve's gods prove to be deeply manipulative beings whom people should no longer mindlessly obey, precisely because of how they go as far as restricting people's access to information out of the fear of losing their worshippers' devotion. They maintain an illusion of control through crafting narratives that rewrite the past and prevent humans from finding the truth about their universe – including the existence of other intelligent species across the Web of Words, whom Zen and Nova discover only in the third volume: "the Guardians have made it very clear that they have never detected any trace of non-human intelligent life in any part of the galaxy. And the Guardians have never been known to lie"[34].

On the other hand, with a science-fictional take on Hayles' claim that "information viewed as pattern and not tied to a particular instantiation is information free to travel across time and space"[35], Reeve makes trains the most powerful entities in the Great Network. From their double position of agents of connection and resistance, which proves subversive towards the guardians' order and ultimately overthrows it, trains can be viewed as heterotopic links between the worlds, in the Foucauldian sense. The French philosopher noted the "extraordinary bundle of relations [that a train represents,] because it is something through which one goes, it is also something by means of which one can go from one point to another, and then it is also something that goes by"[36]. Within Reeve's universe, trains become mobile heterotopias which are both technological spaces of transit and symbolic spaces of transgression, "counter-sites" which simultaneously reflect, connect, and challenge the worlds they traverse. If Foucault saw the ship as "a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself" and that is "the heterotopia *par excellence*"[37], here this title should be given to the sentient trains: they make and keep the other places real through exchanging data between them and constantly updating the Datasea with news from each world, but they also deny the other places' existence, since it depends entirely on the trains' movement through and interaction with them.

## Gender Performativity and Social Constructedness of Human/Non-human Dynamics

Reeve constructs a universe where the trains embody the multiplicity and fluidity of postmodern identity itself. They are the "arteries" of the galaxy, containing and connecting all the stories, all the worlds, and all the possible routes from one to another, while remaining forever in between places, humans, and guardians. But probably the most complex category of characters is represented by the motoriks. They are humanoid androids with sexless bodies who were first designed to serve as soldiers, but then "gradually began to find more peaceful uses, taking over from human workers in dull or dangerous jobs, particularly on uninhabitable worlds in the first stages of terraforming"[38]. Motoriks' creation and existence mirrors Donna Haraway's theory about the cyborg, which she sees as a creature of the post-gender

world, "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction"[39]. As the boundaries between categories such as "human" and "machine" or "natural" and "artificial" have been increasingly blurred since the late twentieth-century onwards, the cyborg has become representative for "a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self"[40] which challenges essentialist notions of identity and embodiment.

Although most of the motoriks are programmed by humans to look like perfect dolls and behave like puppets, some of them, like Nova or Flex (who is a friend of Zen), find it boring. In response, they choose to go beyond the limits of their assigned "roles" and they modify their body-features, underlining the fluidity and freedom of a life lived outside of any ideological box. In a relevant example, Zen and Nova discuss the latter's preference for having freckles, a facial-feature that distinguishes her from the other motoriks: "'They make you look like you're trying to be human.'/ 'I am human,' she said. 'I have a processor for a brain instead of a lump of meat, and my body is made of different substances, but I have feelings and dreams and things, like humans do'"[41].

At the same time, Judith Butler's observations about the performativity and social constructedness of gender[42] can be noticed in the novels through Flex's constant experiments with his/hers:

> He noticed that Flex had changed back into a girl.
> 'Why do you keep switching?' he asked. 'Male to female, female to male…'
> Flex looked up at him and smiled. 'Wouldn't you, if you could?'
> 'I don't think so…'
> 'It doesn't make much difference really,' said Flex. 'Not to Motorik. Only to how others see us. Inside, we're not really male or female. We're just us'[43].

While humans are very attached to their given body and gender, and prove reluctant to the idea of changing their identity in this way, gender flexibility is totally normal for motoriks: "Changing sex was so simple for a Motorik that Flex had never seen any need to settle on being male or female. Sometimes she felt like being a girl, sometimes a boy. But it was only a surface thing, like changing clothes. Inside, Flex was neither. Flex was simply Flex"[44]. Since the main difference between sexes resides solely in how the others perceive the motoriks, it becomes clear that the stable feminine/masculine gender dichotomy seems the only natural order for humans only because social norms continually reorder bodies and behaviors into "coherent" gender scripts. The "performative" aspect of gender is interpreted literally by Reeve here: Flex is free to switch from one sex to another according to how society has labeled the certain type of behavior or appearance that he/she feels like "performing" at a given moment.

In this way, besides making us wonder what would heteronormativity's relevance be in a technoscientific, AI-powered society, Reeve also gives some political and social implications to the issue of how human a machine can be (perceived): one the one hand, to people's concerns that they will be replaced by motoriks at work, the guardians responded by establishing a rule that kept the proportions between them.

However, the corporate families needed a cheaper workforce and so they persuaded the emperor to classify motoriks as humans, thus making the "machines" fit for the jobs reserved for people. This redefinition of personhood, motivated entirely by economic interests, intensified social tensions across class lines and provoked violent riots among impoverished workers struggling to support their families.

Caught in the middle of these conflicts, motoriks – "built to serve, polite, reserved, their synthetic faces deliberately bland (because nobody really wants a servant who is prettier or more interesting than themselves)"[45] – become doubly marginalized. They are exploited by the wealthy, who instrumentalize their ambiguous legal status to sustain a cheap labor force, while simultaneously being viewed as less than human by working-class individuals. The latter redirect their frustrations toward the "robots" rather than toward the structures responsible for their precarity. The result is a deeply cynical capitalist logic in which artificial beings are granted human status only when such recognition benefits the elite, but otherwise remain discriminated subjects. In this context, personhood functions as a flexible commodity dispensed on demand, revealing how definitions of the "human" are shaped by class privilege and economic convenience.

At the same time, Reeve stresses throughout the trilogy that, despite their mechanical bodies, equipped with processors instead of brains, immunity to physical pain, and self-repairing systems, motoriks possess interior lives that are unmistakably human. They experience emotions, cultivate dreams, and form meaningful attachments, demonstrating that their "souls" operate according to the same affective logics as those of biological humans. Their humanoid appearance, originally engineered for military use because "soldiers were less willing to fire on something that looked human"[46], ironically underscores this point: designed to imitate humanity for imperialistic purposes, motoriks ultimately reveal that the capacity to feel, desire, and imagine exceeds the boundaries of organic embodiment. Through these characters, Reeve invites readers to reconsider not only what constitutes a human being, but also how economic systems arbitrarily maintain that boundary for their own benefit.

As for humanity's vulnerability of having just one life and one body vs. the AI's possibility of experiencing life in a plural way – because they can change as many bodies as they want or they can even exist in the form of a mind connected simultaneously to hundreds of bodies – Reeve's suggestion would be that everything is just a matter of perspective: us humans can also touch our face with one hand and a window with the other, thus feeling two different things at the same time and perceiving them with the same mind. Moreover, we are shown that our simple, daily existence is somewhat similar to that of those having multiple selves, making the gap between these two species way smaller: in the writer's words, „Human beings live loads of different lives at once. [...] One life in the real world and the others in daydreams, in memories, in stories, in games, lots of lives all going on at once, and all of them real in some way or other"[47].

For this reason, despite everyone being skeptical about taking the relationship between humans and machines too far (the guardians do not understand what machines could see in humans and humans cannot understand why would you love a

motorik), Reeve gives Zen's and Nova's relationship a solution which could open various discussions about how real is the virtual medium (or how real it could become): in "real" life, Zen will go and live together with Yana Vashti (one of the soldiers who helped him in a battle against the Kraitt), but in a "real" virtual environment created by Nova, he will continue his relationship and life of adventures with her in the form of a simulation. Just as Nova's hundreds of copies are all equally her, Reeve's implication is that both Zen's selves are also equally real, they just have a different set of experiences.

## Conclusions

The *Railhead* trilogy offers a compelling example of what Darko Suvin defines as the *posthumanist novum*, deploying innovations such as sentient trains, socially integrated motoriks, and self-aware AIs to generate sustained cognitive estrangement. These narrative novelties do not function only as mere decorative futurisms here. Instead, they serve as devices that estrange readers from familiar anthropocentric assumptions, while also prompting critical reflection on the categories through which subjectivity or identity are traditionally defined – especially a**s t**he boundaries between human and non-human life have become radically porous.

Within this framework, the trilogy simultaneously reinforces an important contemporary insight, following Mark Fisher's theory: capitalism remains the dominant socio-political system through which speculative futures are often envisioned. Reeve constructs a universe where a newly evolved, self-developing humanity is trying to peacefully coexist with and under the surveillance of its very own technological production, an ecosystem in which human and machine lives are fundamentally interdependent, yet still embedded within hierarchies of value, ownership, and labor shaped by powerful corporate families. This tension asks the trilogy's young readership to contemplate what constitutes the "human", how emotional bonds with non-human entities are formed, and how technological forms of life might challenge or expand our definitions of personhood.

Furthermore, the conclusion of the series exemplifies a form of optimistic technoscientific futurity that remains nonetheless entangled with capitalist logic. The expanding intergalactic railway promises new contact zones where human and alien species might intermingle, creating the potential for a richly diverse and relational cosmos. Yet the Empress's motives are explicitly dual: she seeks to increase her family's economic power while also fostering intercultural exchange that could eventually render biological and cultural differences irrelevant to social belonging. This ambivalent vision captures one of the trilogy's core contradictions: it imagines progressive, inclusive futures while acknowledging that such futures may still be built on structures of inequality, profit, and corporate control.

Ultimately, Reeve's *Railhead* trilogy exemplifies how contemporary YA science fiction can mobilize the *posthumanist novum* to confront readers with pressing ethical and philosophical questions. Through its interplay of cognitive estrangement, capitalist critique, and hopeful interspecies relationality, the trilogy offers a nuanced meditation on the future of humanity – one that remains technologically expansive, socially interconnected, and yet persistently shaped by the political economies of the present.

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## Notes

**1.** See Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2008; Mark J. P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*, New York, Routledge, 2012; Marius Conkan, *Portalul și lumile secundare: tipologii ale spațiului în literatura fantasy*, Bucharest, Tracus Arte, 2017; Marius Conkan, *Building Secondary Worlds in Portal-Quest Fantasy Fiction*, London, Interdisciplinary Discourses, 2020.
**2.** Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Zero Books, 2009, *Capitalist*, p. 2.
**3.** *Ibidem*, p. 16.
**4.** See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1991.
**5.** See Robert T. Tally Jr., *For a Ruthless Critique of All That Exists. Literature in The Age of Capitalist Realism*, Zero Books, 2022.
**6.** Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature*, New York & London, Methuen, 1984.
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**9.** Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, London, Methuen, 1981.
**10.** Darko Suvin, *op. cit.*, p. 65-66.
**11.** *Ibidem*, p. 7-8.
**12.** Dan Hassler-Forest, *Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Politics. Transmedia World-Building Beyond Capitalism,* London & New York, Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, p. 70.
**13.** Philip Reeve, *Railhead*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 306. Philip Reeve helps the readers grasp the full complexity of his world-building by providing a Glossary at the end of each volume, where he explains in detail the origin and history of every key-concept or type of characters that his fictional universe is made of.
**14.** Dan Hassler-Forest, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
**15.** Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010, p. xv.
**16.** Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013, p. 37.
**17.** Joel Garreau, *Radical Evolution: The Promise and Peril of Enhancing Our Minds, Our Bodies - and What It Means to Be Human*, New York, Doubleday, 2005, p. 231-232.
**18.** Francesca Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism,* London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019, p. 35.
**19.** *Ibidem*, p. 35-37.
**20.** Philip Reeve, *Railhead*, p. 303.
**21.** *Ibidem,* p. 301.
**22.** Philip Reeve, *Black Light Express,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 267.
**23.** *Idem*, *Railhead*, p. 241.
**24.** N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman. Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 13.
**25.** Philip Reeve, *Black Light Express*, p. 13.
**26.** *Idem*, *Railhead*, p. 304.
**27.** *Idem*, *Station Zero,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 274-275.
**28.** *Ibidem*, p. 276.
**29.** *Ibidem*, p. 274.
**30.** Rosalind W. Picard, *Affective Computing*, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2000 [1997].
**31.** Peter Kroes, Peter-Paul Verbeek, "Introduction", in Peter Kroes, Peter-Paul Verbeek (eds.), *The Moral Status of Technical Artefacts*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2014, p. 1. Ironically, as various studies dedicated to the development of human interaction with AI chatbots underline, people's dehumanization has

not been prevented by the fact that computers are now endowed with emotional intelligence and are capable of influencing their users. On the contrary, "we are living through a paradox that may define our era. Humans are wired to connect, yet we've never been more isolated. At the same time, artificial intelligence (AI) is growing more responsive, conversational, and emotionally attuned by the day. Perhaps because of this, we are increasingly turning to machines for what we're not getting from each other: companionship. [...] the top use cases of AI today in the U.S. and other similar contexts are no longer just automation or productivity – but companionship and therapy. People are seeking comfort, conversation, and emotional support from chatbots, avatars, and digital assistants" (Isabelle Hau, Rebecca Winthrop, "What happens when AI chatbots replace real human connection", in *Brookings*, online since July 2, 2025, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-happens-when-ai-chatbots-replace-real-human-connection/, last accessed October 28, 2025).

**32.** Philip Reeve, "Railhead A-Z", in *Station Zero* (blog), online since September 6, 2020, https://philipreeveblog.blogspot.com/2020/09/railhead-z.html, last accessed October 24, 2025.

**33.** A K-gate is "a portal through which a train can pass from one point in space to another, often many hundreds or thousands of light years distant" (Reeve, *Railhead*, p. 305).

**34.** *Idem*, *Black Light Express*, p. 304.

**35.** N. Katherine Hayles, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

**36.** Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces", translated from French by Jay Miskowiec, in *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1 (Spring, 1986), https://monoskop.org/images/b/b0/Foucault_Michel_1984_1986_Of_Other_Spaces.pdf, p. 23-24.

**37.** *Ibidem*, p. 27.

**38.** Philip Reeve, *Railhead*, p. 306.

**39.** Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto. Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*, ProQuest Ebook Central, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2016, p. 5.

**40.** *Ibidem*, p. 33.

**41.** Philip Reeve, *Railhead*, p. 45-46.

**42.** Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York & London, Routledge, 1999, p. 32-33.

**43.** Philip Reeve, *Railhead*, p. 233.

**44.** *Idem*, *Station Zero*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 178.

**45.** *Idem*, "Railhead A-Z", https://philipreeveblog.blogspot.com/2020/09/railhead-z.html.

**46.** *Idem*, *Railhead*, p. 182.

**47.** *Idem*, *Station Zero,* p. 268.