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### Two Volumes of "Fantastic" Essays. [Review of *Celebration of the Fantastic*, ed. Donald E. Morse et al., and *State of the Fantastic*, ed. Nicholas Ruddick, Greenwood Press, 1992]

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# Science Fiction Studies

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## BOOKS IN REVIEW

### Two More Volumes of "Fantastic" Essays.

**Donald E. Morse, Marshall B. Tymn, and Csilla Bertha, eds.** *The Celebration of the Fantastic: Selected Papers from the Tenth Anniversary International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts.* Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy #49. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992. xv+309. \$49.95.

**Nicholas Ruddick, ed.** *State of the Fantastic--Studies in the Theory and Practice of Fantastic Literature and Film: Selected Essays from the Eleventh International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts.* Same series #50. Same publisher, 1992. xvi+210. \$49.95. Credit-card orders 800-225-5800.

These are the latest additions to the Greenwood Press series of selected essays from the annual Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts (1989, 1990). The proceedings from the Ninth Conference held in 1988 were never published due to editorial problems. Although the papers appearing in these publications are generally of high caliber, this on-going series has been criticized for both its lack of focus and its overall eclecticism (v. *SFS* #46, 15:381-3, *SFS* #53, 18:140). These two new volumes offer more of the same: a wide-ranging and very heterogeneous collection of conference papers on SF, fantasy, horror, myth, fairy tales, legends, and the supernatural (i.e., all forms of non-mimetic narrative) in literature, painting, film, and television from around the world and viewed from a wide variety of methodological and ideological perspectives. Personally, I find nothing wrong with such all-inclusive conferences; the exposure to variety they promote and the creative energy they tend to generate are refreshing in an over-specialized academe. But published batches of critical papers from

such conferences most often result in fifty-dollar "smorgasbord" reference books which, by attempting to span too wide a spectrum of interests, undermine their own critical purpose and are of questionable usefulness to most readers. To illustrate my point by way of a hypothetical analogy: who would purchase a collection of selected essays from the annual MLA convention?

In all fairness, however, it must be noted that the most recent volume in this series does exhibit (as its title suggests) somewhat more critical cohesiveness--and, incidentally, fewer proofreading oversights--than almost all of its predecessors. Does this signal a subtle change in direction for this well-intentioned but *omnium-gatherum* series? Is the series editor finally beginning to shape the contents of each volume toward a common theme? One can only hope. . . .

Among the twenty-six essays in the former volume, *Celebration of the Fantastic*, those which I found of particular value to SF scholars are H. Bruce Franklin's "The Greatest Fantasy on Earth: The Superweapon in Fiction and Fact," Robert A. Latham's "Some Thoughts on Modernism and Science Fiction," Judith B. Kerman's "Virtual Space and its Boundaries in Science Fiction Film and Television: *Tron*, 'Max Headroom,' and *Wargames*," Barbara Mabee's "The Fantastic in Recent German Democratic Republic Literature," Len Hatfield's "Character Structures and the Subject in Greg Bear's Sequel Novels," and Joan Gordon's "Joe Haldeman: Cyperpunk Before Cyperpunk was Cool?"

In the latter volume *State of the Fantastic* edited by Ruddick, some of the SF essays which I found interesting include Veronica Hollinger's "Specular SF" (29-39) which targets Ballard's *Crash*, Acker's *Empire of the Senseless*, and Wittig's *Les Guérillères* (among other works) as "exercises in postmodern allegory" (29) where "SF tropes function as allegorical components in narratives that are *not* about the future" (30) and where "the imagery of SF...becomes a means of collapsing the future back onto the present in a way that removes the historical specificity and contingency of that present" (33). Peter Malekin's "Paradigms of Knowledge in the Postmodern Fantastic" (41-48) discusses the work of Borges, Lem, Dick, and

Priest and concludes by suggesting that "Paradoxically, intellectual destabilization has itself become a current Western value" (46) and that "this destabilization parallels the extraliterary crisis in hermeneutical confidence that is afflicting literary criticism, theology, the human sciences, and to some extent history" (46). Reinhold Kramer examines Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, John Varley's *Millennium*, and Robert Anton Wilson's *Schrödinger's Cat II: The Trick Top Hat* as instances of what he terms "Gnostic SF" (49-57). Elisabeth Vonarburg's perceptively feminist "The Reproduction of the Body in Space" (59-72) compares the SF of male and female authors in their treatment of biological reproduction in outer space. Jianjiong Zhu analyzes Philip K. Dick from the perspective of *wu* and Zen Buddhism in his "Reality, Fiction, and *Wu* in *The Man in the High Castle*" (107-113). Len Hatfield looks at chaos theory in "Getting a Kick Out of Chaos: 'Fortunate Failure' in Greg Bear's Future Histories" (133-140) and argues that "Bear's strategies are the result of a postmodern working-through of the implications of historical change" (134). And Gary Wolfe in "The Dawn Patrol: Sex, Technology, and Irony in Farmer and Ballard" (159-167) conducts a fascinating investigation  *laFoucault* on the question of "whether it is possible to construct a kind of pornography of the machine...in which the encounter with the machine on its own terms is eroticized in a manner usually reserved for descriptions of sexual encounters" (163).

--**ABE.**