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Review of Science Fiction and the Abolition of Man: Finding C. S. Lewis in Sci-Fi Film and Television

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Book Reviews

Mark J. Boone and Kevin C. Neece, eds., *Science Fiction and the Abolition of Man: Finding C. S. Lewis in Sci-Fi Film and Television* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2017). vii + 346 pages. \$41.00. ISBN 9781498232340.

For decades now, scholars have studied C. S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man* with various religious, philosophical, and literary aims in mind. Mark Boone and Kevin Neece take a fresh and unexpected approach by assembling essays which connect this wartime book to later science fiction films and television shows such as *Blade Runner* and *Star Trek*. Comparisons are also drawn between Lewis's ideas and the themes found in dystopian novels like *Fahrenheit 451* and *1984*. Boone and Neece demonstrate the timelessness of Lewis's 1943 ideas on the future of humanity by applying them to today's popular sci-fi stories. Because of this, *Science Fiction and the Abolition of Man* is an excellent resource for scholars and science-fiction enthusiasts alike.

As these editors understand it, the core of Lewis's *The Abolition of Man* (hereafter *AOM*) is the idea that humans have the power to destroy our own race by misusing science and technology. In other words, improving the human race through artificial means—replacing Nature with science—can result in humanity's downfall.¹ The essays included by Boone and Neece clearly establish the presence of Lewis's theory in today's popular science fiction. Lewis Pearson's essay, "Vulcans Without Chests," focuses

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man, Or, Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 55.

on the lack of emotion present in *Star Trek* characters, paralleling the rigid focus on “logic” with C. S. Lewis’s idea of men without chests. (49). Additionally, Scott Shiffer explores similarities between perspectives of morality in the *Green Lantern* animated series and Lewis’s *Tao* (139). Berns, Fontao, and Juvé’s essay on *The Clonus Horror* demonstrates the consequences of cloning and harvesting organs for the benefit of the clone’s owner (286). Lewis argues that there are no “mere mortals,” thus creating lives only to sacrifice them for scientific advancement or stem cell treatments ultimately cripples humanity in horrific ways.

Science Fiction and the Abolition of Man is a particularly helpful resource for literary and science fiction scholars exploring the lasting effects of AOM. Its essays are organized, like Lewis’s AOM, into three sections (“Men Without Chests,” “The Way,” and “The Abolition of Man”), with each essay illuminating a dire warning by the Oxford don about humanity’s path of self-destruction. Sanford Schwartz, in his book *C. S. Lewis on the Final Frontier*, discusses the themes of existential struggle, Western imperialism, and colonization found in Lewis’s Ransom trilogy, specifically referencing exchanges among Weston, Devine, and the alien beings. Weston and Devine symbolize Western imperialism in their beliefs on colonization and racial superiority.² During the 1940s, when Lewis wrote much of this trilogy, projects focused on improving the human race (much like those performed by Lewis’s N.I.C.E.) were indeed realistic scenarios. Boone and Neece’s collection of essays takes the same literary vector as Schwartz and similar Lewis scholars.

Along with content about Lewis and his writings, the authors of each essay also provide a brief yet thorough overview of the film or television show being discussed for the benefit of readers who are unfamiliar with it. Christina Schneider, for example, summarizes the plot of the film *Never Let Me Go*. Though spoilers are unavoidable in such an approach, these summaries are designed to enhance, rather than discourage, the later viewing of each film. Although Lewis’s literary and philosophical work still receives much attention today, few scholars have begun to apply his ideas to the screen. Much research conducted on Lewis and AOM interacts with science fiction and dystopian literature. The contributors’ enthusiasm for

² Sanford Schwartz, *C. S. Lewis on the Final Frontier: Science and the Supernatural in the Space Trilogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 22.

modern science fiction film and television is refreshing, shedding light on AOM from a new vantage point, making ideas from the 1940s resonate with our own time.

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Colin Duriez, *The Oxford Inklings: Lewis, Tolkien and Their Circle* (Oxford: Lion Hudson Books, 2015). 296 pages, including full-color photograph inserts, "An Inklings Gallery," and "A Select Inklings Chronology." \$16.95. ISBN 9780745956343.

Every biographer of the Inklings faces at least three daunting tasks: first, to strike a suitable balance between breadth and depth; second, to tell the story of the Inklings without giving short shrift to the subtle and sometimes complex ideas that animated their work; and third, to offer insights and perspectives that are not mere summaries of familiar facts that have been recounted many times before. In *The Oxford Inklings*, Colin Duriez achieves all three of these goals, and does so admirably. The fact that it takes him fewer than 300 pages to pull it off makes this a genuinely remarkable book.

Inevitably, an Inklings biography will focus primarily on a handful of core members of the group. Duriez himself identifies nineteen individuals whose involvement is sufficient to merit a paragraph or two in his "Inklings Gallery," and it would be counterproductive for him to attempt to discuss each of their lives and contributions exhaustively. As one would expect, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Owen Barfield, and Charles Williams receive the most attention. One great strength of *The Oxford Inklings*, however, is its effective use of other Inklings' writings to give the reader a sense for what the group was like and how its most prominent members were understood by less well-known or more infrequent attendees. Duriez quotes from the letters and diaries of Nevill Coghill, Lord David Cecil, James Dundas-Grant, Roger Lancelyn Green, Robert "Humphrey" Havard, Warren Lewis, and John Wain, all of whom attended Inklings meetings and offered valuable perspectives. Many of these primary source documents are not easily obtainable, even for academics with a serious interest in the Inklings. Duriez has done his homework, and done it well. His readers are the beneficiaries.