
The Novella as Technology: A Media Story

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ABSTRACT

This essay will situate the rise of the novella to prominence in contemporary literary culture as a media-theoretical problem. The novella has emerged as a premier global form of contemporary literature. The subject of popular writing workshops and major reprint series by both trade and experimental publishing houses, it caters to a desire for novelty in a moment of compressed time for writers and readers alike. But what is it about the form that drives our love of it? How does the relationship between time and technology structure its compelling status as well as the narratives of its history chosen to contextualize it? My examples, from the crucial subgenre of the SF novella as well as its experimental counterparts, will suggest that the mechanics of narrative length and ambition have been mobilized by contemporary writers and readers alike through the novella to reflexively recast relationships between fiction and technology.

KEYWORDS the novella, temporality, science fiction, media, contemporary literature, publishing

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There is a moment early in *Dinner*, a recent novella by Argentinian writer César Aira, that stages an encounter between technology and the contemporary experience of time so explicitly that something like literary form itself seems to emerge from it. The novella, first published in 2006 and then released in 2015 by New Directions in a translation by Katherine Silver, is by my count Aira's forty-sixth, and features a lonely narrator in Pringles who visits an old friend with his mother for the first of the text's eponymous meals. Woven into the narrator's reflections on the nature of fictionality, memory, and broadcast media is a detailed description of a demonstration of a curiosity in the form of an "old windup toy" presented by the novella's first host. The description includes long detours into scenes from the narrator's memory which replicate the toy's mechanics, but I will begin this essay by selecting out and combining the description's three key moments:

It was small, barely larger than the palm of his hand, and was a pretty faithful miniature of an old-fashioned bedroom, complete with a bed, a bedside table, a rug, a wardrobe, and a door at the foot of the bed, which, without a wall to open out from, looked like a second wardrobe and was outfitted with a rectangular box, which I assumed hid one of the characters. Another character was in plain sight, lying on the bed: a blind old woman, partially reclining against some cushions. (Aira 5)

Once our host had wound both keys, he pressed the button and the toy started up. My friend placed it on his palm facing us so we wouldn't miss a single detail. The door to the bedroom opened and a fat young man entered, took two steps along an invisible rail to the foot of the bed, then started to sing a tango, in French. In spite of the toy's age, the music box worked well, though the sound quality was considerably deteriorated. The fat singer's voice was high-pitched and metallic; it was difficult to make out the melody, and the words were unintelligible. He gestured with both arms, and threw his head back histrionically, fatuously, as if he were on stage. The old woman on the bed also moved, though very discreetly and almost imperceptibly: she shook her head from side to side, effectively imitating the way a blind person moves. And, by observing closely, you could tell that she was picking crumbs or fuzz off the bedcover with the thumbs and index fingers of both hands. It was a true miracle of precision mechanics, if you take into account that those tiny moveable porcelain hands measured no more than one-fifth of an inch. (Aira 14)

As soon as the tiny fat automaton began to sing, the second mechanism kicked

in. As my friend had said, there were two simultaneous mechanisms; until now, the gears of the ‘music box’ had activated the device—conventional though very sophisticated. What made this one original was its second set of accompanying movements. The edges of the bedspread hanging over the sides began to move (they looked like fabric but were made of porcelain), and large birds crawled out from under the bed, cranes and storks, very white, moving across the floor and flapping their spread wings; though they were birds, they didn’t take flight but remained fixed on the floor. They kept emerging from under both sides of the bed, ten, twelve, an entire flock, until they covered the bedroom floor, all while the fat singer was belting out his mechanical tango in French. At the end of the song, he retreated without turning around, until he had passed the threshold and the door closed behind him, the birds returned to under the bed, and the old woman to her immobility, all very quickly, in a single instant, surely due to the action of the springs. (Aira 16)

These descriptions are both familiar in the automaton genre and extreme, combining technical specificity with a sense of the fantastic activated by scalar pressure. What’s immediately clear is the degree to which the toy bears the weight of formal allegory we have come to associate with the automaton, especially in the wake of twentieth-century critical thought. In the first two descriptive interludes, we understand the toy’s figures as “characters” either visible or in waiting, or receive in a wry combination of dialogue and scare quotes the characterization of time the toy takes to complete its operations as a “show.” The details of the description approach the level of the absurd or surreal without definitively occupying it, and the automatons’ technical operations function plausibly for the narrator, who considers their capacities matched by his own abilities to perceive their workings. Significantly, the narrator requires two things of the toy’s demands on his attention: the clear capacity of interpretation beyond the scene, and for that interpretation to transcend the specificity of individual memory or experience. The narrator demonstrates his own attempts at interpretation thus: “The makers of the toy must have wanted to show that the old woman’s death was close at hand. Which made me think that the whole scene was telling a story: until that moment I had only admired the prodigious art of the toy’s mechanics, without wondering what it meant. But its meaning, buried in a superior strangeness, could only be guessed” (Aira 14). The narrator uncovers something he locates beyond the “prodigious art” of “mechanics”—the object achieves a sense of buried meaning because it aspires to narrative, and the cumulative effect is a “superior strangeness” we might enshrine as the intended effect at minimum of the work of fiction at hand but also of Aira’s

oeuvre as a whole.

For something about the concatenation of meaning within a technological object, even one of old or minimal technicity, allows the leaps in *Dinner* between description, interpretation, and the second-order encoding of generic concern that will be the focus of this essay. In it, I will be unfolding a minor history of contemporary literature's premier minor form, the novella, as it self-consciously positions itself as an arbiter of the contemporary experience of time and attention. Immediately after the automaton completes its cumulative operations in *Dinner* and the host returns it to its rightful place in his cabinet of curiosities, the narrator observes that "the whole show hadn't lasted more than two minutes," and, irritated that his interpretation of it hadn't been shared by his mother, speculates that "its speed must have been the reason my mother didn't understand anything, what the story was about or what the thing even was" (Aira 16). He registers a concern about compactness and completeness that will haunt the novella's continued encounter with form as it continues (it transforms, abruptly, into a live broadcast zombie apocalypse). To be able to access "superior strangeness," or in other words a level of meaning that takes the form of narrative and can be accessed only in an act of interpretation, and also to be able to comprehend a mechanical object enough to give it a name, requires the overcoming of its compression in time. To contain such multitudes in such a compacted performance threatens to render aesthetic or technical objects illegible in the face of those accustomed to other practices of representation.

I am beginning with such an inductive example partly because of the near-anachronism of a turn to the discursive, and especially the literary, at this moment in the recent history of media theory, which is a major frame for my thinking about the contemporary novella. And I will be making the case in this essay that there is in fact something novel about the instance and insistence of the contemporary novella that provides access to the questions of technicity, mediality, and experience that gather the essays in this volume more broadly. Novellas like Aira's *Dinner* work on multiple levels to extend their concerns into a broader theorization of materializations of time in contemporary media environments, and are themselves the best arbiters we have of why so many are reading *in this way* right now. My tour of the contemporary novella and its medial affordances will begin with a discussion of how the novella has been circulating in contemporary Anglophone reading culture, and will develop an account of that circulation in relation to chronopoesis, and move thereafter into the specific case of the Science Fiction novella and its interest in technology. I will conclude with a gesture to how the interaction be-

tween the SF novella and the contemporary experimental strain in novella publishing instantiates a set of theses about technology and experience that can be instructive for wider discussions of contemporary culture.

Novellas are small. They don't take up a lot of space. If you are reading a physical copy (and because of their size, many do), it fits delightfully easily in a handbag or in the back pocket of your jeans. One of the many contradictions that attends the novella form is the sense of duration that accompanies it—as objects, they are things that can be always there, because of their portability, the thing you never have to be without. But, of course, because of their short claim on attention relative to the novel, they seem like the thing we won't have around for very long, a brief, transient attachment. Novellas are lightweight, a physical term with metaphoric resonance that has often carried in their history. By including such a dramatic performance of both smallness in space but also of duration in *Dinner*, Aira extends the object's logic outward from miniaturization and scale to something that points to the internal coherence of his preferred fictional form. Like the novella in which it is housed and to which it refers, the toy in *Dinner* is complete, and achieves its completion phenomenologically in the feedback loop between its perception within the fictive frame and its measurement of the experience of that fiction. Thus it is not that the object seems miniature but rather marginal, or miniscule on its own terms that matters here for a reflexive account of genre in its material conditions. I am drawn in thinking about this to how the philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman characterizes the minor as theoretical object in his novella-like volume of theory, *Survival of the Fireflies*. Turning to Hannah Arendt's posthumous elegy of Walter Benjamin, he notes how her account of Benjamin's attachments to the small and the minor dwells on how "the more a phenomenon is held back, discreet, minor and even miniscule . . . the more it is a carrier of time" (Didi-Huberman 17), but also, in her words, "the smaller the object, the more likely it seemed that it could contain in the most concentrated form everything else" (qtd. in Didi-Huberman 18).¹ Here it is worth pointing out that of course the novella is not the smallest fictional form; far from it. Nor is it a mere miniaturization of the novel. Rather, it contains in concentrated rather than miniaturized form the project of the novel and today builds in an almost uncanny recognition of the novel's more diminished position among competing media forms and exploits that recognition.

¹ Benjamin is the twentieth century's most accomplished theorist of the novella, which features briefly but significantly in his essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*.

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To help give some context for this claim, a brief survey of the novella's ascendance in contemporary Anglophone reading culture is instructive. Often thought of as unpublishable or at the very least unprofitable, the novella has enjoyed a remarkable run of popularity in the first decades of the twenty-first century. The most visually striking example of this popularity is the spread of novellas released by Melville House as part of their ongoing "Art of the Novella" series, which "celebrates this renegade art form" and offers either individual titles (of fifty-seven currently published), a monthly subscription in which two titles from the series are chosen and packaged together in either digital or paperback form and sold with domestic and international options, or the entire paperback run for just over \$200 U.S. dollars. Additionally, the novella is central to the millennial success of New Directions Publishing, which does not exclusively publish novellas but has been popularly rewarded for a historic openness to the form (New Directions has published seventeen Aira works to date, almost all of which are novellas). New Directions also publishes a "Pearls" series, featuring "short masterpieces by great authors at enticing prices" that tend to run at the shorter end of the novella spectrum, which spans between 17,000 and 20,000 words up to 40,000, with some variance. The small, feminist, highly-regarded Dorothy, a Publishing Project, has also established the core of its reputation through a list comprised largely of novellas.

The flourishing of the novella has been registered in popular literary journalism, and I will provide a range of examples here from just the past decade: a quote feature in the *New York Times Magazine* from 2011 on "The Case for the Novella";² Ian McEwan on "Some Notes on the Novella" for the *New Yorker* in 2012 (McEwan); in *The Atlantic* that same year we have "The Return of the Novella, the Original #Longread" which promises that "the form has been the ugly stepchild of the literary world. But that's starting to change" (Fassler); *Forbes* weighing in on "The Novella Economy: Making Novellas Profitable" in 2013 (Charman-Ander-son); a *Gizmodo* piece noting the increase of Science Fiction novella series with "Tor.com Explains Why Novellas Are the Future of Publishing" (Anders); a *Guardian* piece from 2016, quoting Nick Earls in its headline "Have novellas become the happy medium between a tweet and tome?" (Earls); *Wired* magazine in 2018 on "The Rise of the Sci-Fi Novella: All the Imagination, None of the Burden" (Kehe); and in *The Daily Beast*, "The Novella is Making a Comeback" (Antrim). It is not hard to find recommendations for novellas like *Flavorwire's* "The

² See *The New York Times Magazine* 4 Mar. 2011: "Block Quote: The Case for the Novella," adapted from "The Three-Day Weekend Plan," an essay by John Brandon in *The Late American Novel: Writers on the Future of Books* (Soft Skull, 2011).

Best Two Hours of Your Weekend” or to see the novella powering American actress and screenwriter Lena Dunham’s “#keepit100ld” book club.

There is plenty of room for speculation about the engines of this popularity, and any account must contend with the multiple traditions of the novella throughout its history as well as its ambivalence in nomenclature, for many writers and publishers avoid the term even while others are actively embracing it. Writers like McEwan, in the article cited previously, also at times refer to the novella as “the perfect form of prose fiction,” and the idea of the “perfect” as a form of compression returns often, although others like Stephen King refer to the whole of novella production as “anarchy-ridden” in terms of generic coherence. Jane Smiley identifies novellas as “exceptional acts of craftsmanship” that contain “more than a short story’s lightning strike,” but also observes that the genre is a “middle child” capable of complexity but only one kind at a time (qtd. in Smith). The surveys cited earlier will call the novella “fiction’s most open-ended and compellingly discursive form” (Antrim), the “form for the age” (Earls), “vibrant and readable” (Kehe), and a form currently “in its Golden Age” (Brandon, qtd. in *New York Times Magazine*).

It is also worth noting that although the novella is thriving within several market sectors of the Anglophone literary world, it does seem to do so with interesting limitations. It is broadly true that the world of Anglophone literary fiction is doing a better job of embracing and acknowledging works in translation, from now popular classics like the Neapolitan novels to a more robust prize culture for works in translation and translators themselves. In the case of the novella these trends are accelerated. A more negative account of the popularity of and attention to works in translation in contemporary novella publishing points out, like Tobias Carroll in *The Writer* magazine, that they are at least not a particularly American form (Carroll). This is also considered something to be celebrated in several accounts, as in the fragment I cited earlier from *The New York Times Magazine*: “Let’s agree, shall we, to keep throwing around the inane term Great American Novel, and to never, ever utter the phrase Great American Novella. Let’s agree not to remind California what it used to take for granted, that novellas, because of their length, can often be more handily adapted than novels into movies. Let us not remind New York what all the avid and demanding among us take for granted, that a volume of three novellas is more intriguing than one flabby novel. Let us downplay the novella in casual conversation. . . . That way, we need never be nostalgic for the Golden Age of the novella.” That call, from the earliest piece I have cited on the topic (2011), might now be rightfully considered a lost cause. But it does something to capture the appeal and recalcitrance of the idea of the novella before its current boom.

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And I prefer a slightly different account of the broad internationalism of the novella's current moment in English-language publishing. It seems no accident, to me, that the novella's most prominent home has been with the independent presses most commonly associated with the capacity to recognize great writing that has been otherwise unknown in their readership. A *New Yorker* article exploring "How Staying Small Helps New Directions Publish Great Books" notes how the press was the first U.S. publisher of writers including "Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda, Roberto Bolaño, Anne Carson, W. G. Sebald, and László Krasznahorkai," a success conditioned by its "worldly capacity" (Bustillos). The novella thus reframes a broad discussion happening across comparative literature, global Anglophone literature, and American literary studies, for the novellas I am describing certainly resist the frame Tim Parks lays out for what he wryly calls "the dull new global novel" (Parks). It is tied to what Jeanne-Marie Jackson highlights when she argues for distinguishing the "mainstream literary novel from its more 'serious' small press counterparts," in a discussion of fiction that is both substantively transnational and accomplished in what she calls that "'indie' way." In her view, and she is speaking specifically of the novel, the "ideal small press novel is one that takes seriously the question of what a novel, rather than a film or image, *can* do best" (Jackson). Pieter Vermeulen and Amélie Hurkens, writing about what they describe as the "Americanization of World Literature," acknowledge the understudied relation of small press publishing to questions of literary value in discussions of world literature and the reading of literature in translation, but also point out that the story of the increasing "role of US-based institutions in the mediation of world literature" is not best described by the accusations of trivialization, regression, or aesthetic diminishment that often accompany the narrative of that transformation (Vermeulen and Hurkens 434). Vermeulen and Hurkens look to instances where "mass-market success and niche appeal . . . do not exclude one another" (435) especially as enacted by many of the independent presses I have been mentioning, though New Directions is largely excluded partly due to its prominence in the independent press scene. Ultimately, I am convinced that these discussions would be more complete if they made the link between not only the smallness of the independent publisher and its success in translation, but also the smallness of the publisher and of so many of its key texts as well.

That these "middle child" or "medium" length texts have so dramatically captured imaginations is not, I am also claiming here, a story about the scalar category of "the medium" but rather a story about media in the twenty-first century (although I do appreciate the pun potential). Something that characterizes the contemporary discussion about novellas and the reading of novellas across many venues is a

many-layered focus on the experience of reading novellas, an experience partly tied to the shape of the volume but primarily tied to the time it takes to read a novella. Buried within this commentary, I would suggest, may be the most medium-specific account of temporality in contemporary fiction, in addition to its larger commentary on the materializations of time in our contemporary media environments. Technical definitions of the novella, as I alluded to before, often focus on markers like word count (up to 40,000 words) or page count (up to 100 pages) to delimit the form. Harder to describe is the persistent sense that there is a way to understand the novella that sutures precisely to the sense readers have of the delimited reading experience it provides. For some, the novella is the form most suited to bodies in motion—it is the contemporary version of the “commute reading” (Anders)³ so central to the history of the novel and the history of transit—the kind of text those involved in a standard commute can complete reading in a week. These accounts, unsurprisingly, also demonstrate an awareness of time itself as a commodified quantity for the readers (Anders), a sense electrically doubled in the novella’s overt instantiation of something like “commute time.” Others focus on the novella’s answer to a contemporary condition not of timelessness, which would be nice, but of extreme timeboundedness, a quality attached to a reading public whose reading time is constrained precisely by the pressures on time created by competing digital media (Earls). The most common explanation of novella time may be the admittedly vague “can be read in a sitting,” which is of course relative (the definition of “sitting” varies wildly even within my single household, for example). Most useful, I think, are the temporal analogies across art forms that are employed to make sense of novella time—for example, the time it takes to read a novella compared to the time one spends watching one of Shakespeare’s plays. Formally, they are compared in music to the sonata, quartet, or Schubert song, all highly respected forms with internal integrity recognized by discipline (McEwan). These examples signify in several ways—for instance, economically through the assigning of a kind of value to a timespan (this is the sense implied by descriptions of contemporary novella culture that focus on time as a finite resource). More salient, I think, are the analogies to forms of aesthetic experience that translate from the realm of performance to that of individualized reading practice.

I can’t yet fully answer questions like “How is a novella like a sonata?” or “How is reading a novella like watching a Shakespeare play?” or “How is reading a novella

³ A reader for this piece helpfully points out that the relationship of reading with commute time, so brilliantly traced in Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s *Railway Journey*, takes specific historical forms, in which the novella’s recent interventions as a medium both participates and refines.

like listening to Beethoven's String Quartet No. 13 in B Major?" And the questions also require further generalizations to work on a formal level. The first place to turn, however, for an accurate and formally rigorous image of the temporal work of the novella in all of its material and media capacities would be the novella itself. The example with which I began, the set piece in Aira's *Dinner*, provides just one such accounting, drawing attention to limitations in time and space and a combined, synchronous aesthetic project with ramifications for the apprehension of meaning.

Alternatively, *A Brief History of Portable Literature*, a 1985 novella by Spanish writer Enrique Vila-Matas and published in a translation by Anne McLean and Thomas Bunstead by New Directions in 2015, celebrates with a postmodern delight the novella's self-styling as a compact form. It features a secret society named the Shandies, introduced as a name drawn from Lawrence Sterne and Yorkshire dialect with a focus on the meanings "joyful as well as voluble or zany" (Vila-Matas 1). The society includes writers and artists including Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Georgia O'Keefe, and of course Walter Benjamin, who plays a central role in the society's operations when he translates what the narrative identifies as a Duchampian paradigm for portability into a materially responsible measurement system. "Walter Benjamin," we learn, "came up with a remarkably successful design for the joyous book-weighing machine that bears his name and allows us to judge, to this day, with unerring precision, which literary works are insupportable, and therefore, though they may try to disguise the fact—untransportable." The narrator then notes the lore around Benjamin's love of the small that I mentioned earlier, how "he had a fondness for old toys, postage stamps, photographic postcards, and those imitations of real winter landscapes contained within a glass globe where it snows when shaken" (2). The novella's key engine is novellanness, or the encoding of form as motivation for and constitution of history. For while portability refers first to a spatial category, its mass, the novella infuses the idea of mass throughout with a subtle and distinct sense of limitation that is itself far less limited. So not only do society members like Benjamin and Duchamp know that "to miniaturize is to make portable, and for a vagrant and an exile, that is the best way of owning things" (2), but this kind of knowledge also conditions the novella's narrative production in other ways. At the end of a catalogue of Odradeks, a category of small formal analogues drawn from a creature of Kafka's (himself another key figure in the history of the novella), the narrator intervenes in his own tale. "I thought to carry on talking about Odradeks, but now I see that the most prudent thing would be to end this chapter," he says. "Yes, perhaps it is the most advisable thing for me. After all, my history has to be a brief one, or none at all" (42).

This brief history, in mapping its brevity precisely and complexly onto its mass, performs itself as a formal object entirely bound by its own operations. Which is also what all novellas do, but in the case of a number of playfully self-referential texts becomes their theme or formal self-thematization. Roberto Bolaño repeats the gesture in his final “novel,” written in 2002 and published in a Natasha Wimmer translation by New Directions in 2014, *A Little Lumpen Novelita*. *Novelita* begins with an Artaud epigraph including the line “all writing is garbage,” and proceeds by equating novella time and biography, enacting a lumpen Bildungsroman embodied by Bianca, its narrator. Instead of a protracted narrative, Bianca provides the architecture of development and then punctuates it with a determining episode. “Now I’m a mother and a married woman,” she begins, “but not long ago I led a life of crime. My brother and I had been orphaned. Somehow that justified everything. We didn’t have anyone. And it all happened overnight” (Bolaño 3). We are all well enough conditioned by genre to disbelieve her logic of motive here, as throwaway as its sentences. Yet the seeming cliché—“it all happened overnight”—proves more trenchant for the form in which she constrains her tale. The drama of garbage extends to the making-diminutive of the diminutive—the shift from novella to the more gendered, cuter novelita, undercutting its own diminution in the joke. That joke seems to extend to the book’s marketing materials, such as its quoted reviews gracing the book cover, which are rather delightfully ambiguous. They include one that claims that *Novelita* “feels as substantial as a book three times as long,” or another that says that “while short,” it is nevertheless “among Bolaño’s most intoxicating works,” and another that says the book is the author’s “best trick.”

The hesitation to describe then reinscribes the novella’s aggressive reclamation of its minoriness in time and mass. It is an overt reclamation characteristic of the contemporary novella across several of its key genres. In science fiction, one of the novella’s central genres both historically and in its contemporary flourishing we can see this gesture at work in novellas like *This Shape We’re In*, published by McSweeney’s in 2001, an uncanny chronicle of an expedition through a body otherwise referred to as the “shape.” I won’t belabor the novella’s dense allegorical structure but would like to hold it up as another example of an overt thematization of form that maps the time of a journey into an incongruous shape, the joke being of course that this shape we’re in is something like a lumpen novelita made literal. As the narrator looks out of the shape’s eye to perhaps perceive us in all of our desultory amusements, he sees a children’s show: “A pair of actors constrained as the front and rear of a horse pranced and kicked in tandem, then parted to sign autographs and muss the hair of bewildered children; I understood this actorly

horse to be a representation, a celebration of our shape, *this shape . . .*" (Lethem 53-54).

The connection between the flavors of material self-reference so crucial to the metafictional glee I have been describing in writers like Bolaño and Vila-Matas and the genre embeddedness in Jonathan Lethem could not be more explicit. These are novellas that, in foregrounding and even excessively thematizing their form, or at this extent enacting themselves in caricature of that form's spatial and temporal characteristics, provide a helpful index to the project of the novella in its contemporary literary milieu. And while histories of the novella, when they do appear, often look to European traditions in Germany and elsewhere, few address the question of genre, despite the outsized role science fiction and fantasy have played in the development of the novella as a standalone form. Where the rise of the novella's popularity in mainstream and literary fiction has been narrated as a novelty of this decade, in the Science Fiction and Fantasy world, the novella is an established, even essential, form. Both the Hugo and Nebula Awards have novella categories—the Nebula began awarding novella writers in 1966, and the Hugo in 1968 (and both awards have "novelette" categories, a subject for another day). The science fiction novella raises several genre-internal questions about scale and world-building, for example, that exceed my topic here. Instead, I would like to turn to what a snapshot of some of the most recent prizewinning science fiction and fantasy novellas reveals about the relationship between form, materiality, and time, especially when the generic focus on technology so central to science fiction informs its codes.

Science fiction novellas test the extent to which the novella's formal self-awareness as a time technology can be mobilized within the fictional frame. One of the great nineteenth-century novellas, of course, is H. G. Wells's 1895 *The Time Machine*, a prototypical text for both the histories of the novella and science fiction alike. The kinds of technological engagement characteristic of science fiction often rely on genre torque—they allow fictions to remain faithful to scientific principles while using speculative technological innovation to pressure the realist constraints of science. For philosophers like Quentin Meillassoux, this is a limitation of the genre, and he calls, in his novella-like text *Science Fiction and Extro-Science Fiction*, for a speculative gesture that pushes world-building beyond the constraints of scientific knowledge and its technological apparatus, however extraordinary the latter may be (Meillassoux). But in the world of the novella, constraint itself is crucial. In the science fiction novella, the sense of the form itself as apparatus is so powerful that it folds back into the narrative, repositioning any actor on knowledge or technique. The science fiction novella, that is, deploys its self-

knowledge as an encapsulation of the experience of reading time to condition any deployments of speculative technology within that implicit acknowledgement of form. Thus within the speculative genres science fiction novellas have a particular purchase on the distinctions between technique and technology that philosophers of science are often keen to unpack from homogenous English usage. This is a distinction often popularized in the work of Michel Serres, whose most recent intervention is useful for the science fiction novella when he says, in *Thumbelina: The Culture and Technology of Millennials*, that “Techniques lead to or assume the hard sciences; technologies presuppose and lead to the humanities, public meetings, politics and society” (21). And although he frames this within the more standard discussion of *techné*,⁴ he borrows from the generic distinctions of science fiction, not simply the disciplinary language of the hard and soft sciences. This is, I would speculate, because science fiction knows what the media theory of the cultural technique knows, which is that the hinge between materials, fabrication, and the concrete, on the one hand, and culture, signs, and experience on the other, is the most interesting place to inhabit.

Not surprisingly, given this history and generic ambit, many of the contemporary science fiction novellas gaining critical attention like to stage dramatic manipulations of time and mass within their own constraints—for a well-known example from the recent past you might turn to Ted Chiang’s “Story of Your Life,” which won the Hugo and Nebula novella awards in 2000 before it hit its mainstream adaptation in the 2016 film *Arrival*. This is certainly true of the examples I would like to outline here, all taken from the most recent prize round in SF novella publishing. They include Aillete de Bodard’s *The Tea Master and the Detective* (2018), winner of the 2019 Nebula Award for Best Novella and finalist for the 2019 Hugo Award for Best Novella. I will discuss two of the 2019 Hugo finalists as well: Nnedi Okorafor’s *Binti: The Night Masquerade* and Kelly Robson’s *Gods, Monsters, and the Lucky Peach*, both published by Tor Books’s novella publishing imprint (Liptak).

Robson’s *Gods, Monsters, and the Lucky Peach* develops its encounter with time primarily as an irritation. Like *The Time Machine*, the novella’s opening position is on a version of a dying earth. Its protagonist, Minh, works in ecological restoration, devoted to an attempt to reclaim a burnt planet for eventual human rehabilitation. Her “ecological remediation” work, primarily on river ecology, faces an existential threat from the invention of time travel technology, which swallows both the

⁴ The French language distinguishes between *techniques* and *technologies*. Very generally, a technique is a process or practice of fabrication, whereas technology (from the Greek *tekhné*, technique, and *logos*, discourse or study) is a discourse about techniques. In English, the word *technology* has expanded to cover almost all senses of the Greek *tekhné*.

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resources and motivation for continued investment in the future of the present planet's habitable surface, at least as that might be achieved through work on its present conditions. The novel stages its encounter with technology through this clash: its narrative concern begins with the post-apocalyptic world and its accommodations. These include Minh's specific research and practice in river ecology, but also her hybrid cyborg bodily modifications, for her capabilities include not only constant self-monitoring and hormone control as well as controlled non-verbal communication interfaces across distance, but also more visually striking bioengineering modifications like her six octopus-like leg appendages. You would think this would be enough for a novella, but the entire exercise in world-building in which Minh's enhancements and knowledge matter upends in the way her politics predict, employing her instead within the ravenous time-travel enterprise and sending the river scientist from the year 2267 to 2024 BCE at the site of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. This interruption stages the novella's encounter with its own constraints twofold. First, it provides a simultaneously playful and ominous antidote to the rapidly reducing reading time felt in the haptic feedback loop of the small object held, its end seemingly deferrable by time travel exception, a sense Minh herself condemns as the political excuse for resource diversion against the hard work of ecological restoration. But this sense folds back in on narrative time as well, for on her mission in the Tigris and Euphrates region, Minh executes all of her research against a "contact timer," which measures and predicts how long she has at any point to end her work before an unwanted (usually hostile) encounter with the temporally appropriate population. As a result, the narrative within the novella fractures into increasingly tense episodes controlled by increasingly unreliable countdown clocks. Scenes such as the following reinscribe the novella's pressures of closure within the narrative of encounter between technologically distinct groups:

Kiki and I are packing up, Hamid whispered. Send your float ahead so we can get your samples stowed.

Four minutes left. She could get one more benthic sample on the way back to the skip. Maybe two.

Minh hooked her fingers around the edge of the float and sent it coasting downriver, back toward the fig tree. She held tight and floated behind it, legs trailing.

Minh, what are you doing? Kiki whispered. *Do you want to get killed?*

I told Kiki you wouldn't listen, Fabian whispered.

Minh shoved a slack net into the mud, then grabbed another net and shifted ten meters downstream.

They're soldiers. They have weapons, Kiki whispered. *Two minutes away. Can't you see the countdown?*

Minh bagged the samples and threw them onto the float. (Robson 147)

Minh's experience of the countdown leads to a series of devastating physical and psychological consequences. These require a narrative innovation to escape the countdown structure, an escape in turn needed to provide any glimmer of possibility of survival in the novella's past environment or in its present one. The novella executes this sidestepping of the pressure of the countdown, or closure, ultimately by doubling down on its finitude—the countdown ends precisely when the novella abruptly does, at a combining of temporal and narrative perspectives that render the technology obsolete.

Lucky Peach's cofinalists for the 2019 Hugo novella award, Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti: The Night Masquerade* and Ailette de Bodard's *The Tea Master and the Detective* each develop a similarly pointed mediation of the relationship between form and genre through technology. Both pair their primary identifications of science fiction and novella with a generic twist—*Binti: The Night Masquerade* is the third novella in a trilogy that plays with the conventions of the female Bildungsroman and *The Tea Master and the Detective*, as the title suggests, works as a Holmes-style mystery. Both also feature sentient spaceships as either character or narrator. In the case of *The Tea Master and the Detective*, also winner of the 2019 Nebula award for best novella and published not by novella giant Tor.com but by Michigan-based Subterranean Press, the narrator is "*The Shadow's Child*," a sentient "mindship" recovering from trauma who enters into a collaboration with the eccentric scientist Long Chau, Holmes to her Watson. *Binti* works to undermine and then re-engage the Bildungsroman by killing off its narrator midway through the novella. The novella survives her death and continues without her, but in the genre-compounding chapter "Space Is the Place" Binti's "I" voice returns. This narrator, however, who has already been functioning as a collective through transformations chronicled in the prior volumes, emerges as a new kind of collectivity, for her resurrection was

made possible through a merging with a sentient ship named New Fish. Binti becomes aware of this when not only does she “[feel] the ship rumble, the leaves, flowers, stems, and branches around us shaking,” but we also learn that she “felt the ship’s voice more than heard it, in every part of me, but especially my chest, left arm, and legs” (Okorafor 150). These kinds of moves—entangling genres, plausibly developing sentient ship technology that must also be functional within elaborately constructed alien political systems, employing nonhuman narrative strategies to render not only nonhuman sentience but the encounter of that sentience with human consciousness, and exploring the consequences of the resultant collective experience within multiple genre codes—all would seem to exceed, quite grandly, the limitations of the novella, yet they are held up as this year’s most exemplary cases of it. By not simply defying the limitations of their deliberately chosen container but brazenly exploiting its capacities through the language of capacity itself, these novellas tell an almost outrageous story about the place of the contemporary novella in both science fiction publishing and the broader literary world. They insist that the form is *enough*; that, like the speculative technologies it houses, it can be mobilized aspirationally, and evoke utopian—in these cases often feminist—modes of collective thought and action capturable within the space of a sitting.

The science fiction novella forms a crucial node between mainstream literary novellas and their experimental counterparts. The novellas surveyed here lodge within their genre play a sense of technology as a collection of spatial and temporal techniques that return as second-order commentary on the form’s capabilities. They take the sense echoed from the texts with which I began this essay—that the novella provides privileged access to the temporal experience of contemporary reading life and reinscribes that access as experience—and explore the potential of genre to nuance the story. They also reframe the genre interest of more overtly experimental contemporary novellas within a more nuanced history of the form.⁵

The story of the contemporary novella that I have begun to unfold here is a media story because in its breadth and self-awareness the current iteration of the form works explicitly as a story about the technical experience of time, constraint, and completeness. The novella’s flourishing in contemporary reading culture is certainly informed by its more practical relations to time and portability, as its practitioners are well aware, but it is also more than that. By enacting those relations as medial relations, as exercises in understanding how time is measured and experienced in our moment, these fictions suggest that we are reading far more richly and

⁵ See, for example, Garza; Lim.

attending to far more superior strangeness than many accounts of contemporary attention acknowledge.

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