

CONCEPTS, THEORIES, & INTRODUCTIONS

Islands in Speculative Fiction: The Functions of Islands in Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror Film and Writing

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The study of islands in speculative fiction intersects with cultural geography, political theory, and literary futurology. It unfolds within the concept of relational shifts between islands and continents, the deconstruction and reconstruction of the East-West binary, and the dynamic interplay between technology and human knowledge systems. As one of the most technologically and socially imaginative forms of literature, speculative fiction positions humanity within a vast coordinate system spanning the local, the global, and even the interstellar. In so doing, it examines and reflects upon the past, present, and future of human civilization—ultimately offering insights that may contribute to a more harmonious and sustainable future. Building on these themes, this special section explores how islands are represented and imagined in speculative fiction, including science fiction, to uncover the unique qualities that distinguish future-oriented island narratives from their traditional counterparts. The papers included here can be divided into three key thematic categories: (1) islands as liminal spaces for seeking identity and redemption, (2) islands as sites of ecological and economic crisis, and (3) islands as realms of colonial and utopian imaginations.

Over recent decades, island studies has evolved into a multi-dimensional field, with its geographical scope expanding significantly. As increasing scholarly attention has been directed towards the field, it becomes necessary to understand the relational shifts in the processes by which islands and archipelagos form and are perceived (Zhu & Grydehøj, 2023). This relational approach suggests that people's perceptions of islands are inherently shaped and constrained by specific cultural and temporal factors (Grydehøj et al., 2020). The concept of the Anthropocene further complicates our understandings of these relationships (Pugh & Chandler, 2021). Meanwhile, a decolonizing turn in island studies calls for embracing Indigenous and local voices, knowledge, and worldviews while rejecting dominant Western

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epistemology and colonial legacies. This approach emphasises examining islands within broader sociopolitical, economic, and environmental contexts (Grydehøj et al., 2021; Nadarajah et al., 2022). However, despite these evolving perspectives, island studies has often overlooked how islands are represented in literature (with significant exceptions including Crane & Fletcher, 2017; Fletcher, 2011; Graziadei et al., 2017; Riquet, 2019)—particularly in speculative fictions, a realm that frequently envisions alternative or future worlds.

Addressing this gap between island studies and literary representation, Mascha Gugganig and Nina Klimburg-Witjes (2021) explore the intricate geographical and political links between islands and continents, highlighting how islands function as sites of technological experimentation and scientific knowledge production. They argue that socio-technical imaginaries—visions of idealised futures—play a crucial role in shaping technological initiatives and that these imaginaries may also reinforce pre-existing cultural and political frameworks (Gugganig & Klimburg-Witjes, 2021). Speculative fiction, which similarly grapples with themes of technology, science, and imagined futures, offers a complementary perspective: Its imaginative portrayal of islands can shed light on these themes in ways that island studies has yet to fully explore.

The term ‘speculative fiction’ has been interpreted in various ways in literary studies, in constant interplay with science fiction, at times overlapping and at other times diverging. Marek Oziewicz (2017) traces the historical development of these two concepts and proposes three distinct definitions for speculative fiction. The first understanding regards speculative fiction as a subgenre of science fiction, emphasizing its human elements rather than technological ones. This understanding of speculative fiction is attributed to Robert A. Heinlein (1947), who first employed and popularised the term to highlight that science fiction should explore human existence and emotions rather than merely showcase technology. In doing so, Heinlein sought to imbue science fiction with literary value and to change the stereotypical view of it as purely technical. The second understanding defines speculative fiction as a genre distinct from—and even opposed to—science fiction, concentrating on the exploration of possible futures. Margaret Atwood (2011), a key proponent of this view, describes speculative fiction as exploring theoretical situations grounded in what is possible, focusing on sociopolitical circumstances that could potentially occur. She thus differentiates speculative fiction from science fiction by arguing that while science fiction often involves the impossible, speculative fiction deals with what is possible (Atwood, 2011).

A third definition, as adopted by this special section, treats speculative fiction as an inclusive super-category, encompassing all narrative genres that deliberately depart from everyday experience and subvert ‘consensus reality’ in a non-imitative manner. Oziewicz (2017) remarks that this broader definition results in an extraordinarily diverse field, including, but not limited to,

fiction of utopia, dystopia, the ideal state, horror, steampunk, slipstream, alternative history, cyberpunk, time travel, and magical realism, gothic fiction, supernatural romance, weird fiction, new weird, (post)apocalyptic fiction, mythology, legends, retold or fragmented fairy tales, folk narratives, ghost stories, and new-wave fiction. The sheer breadth of these narratives causes the boundaries of speculative fiction to blur. Oziwicz (2017) further proposes that speculative fiction should be viewed as “a field of cultural production” (p. 1), redefining the power struggles within it. He envisions it as an integral part of modern global culture—a truly global phenomenon that rejects the traditional Western science versus ‘the Other’ myth paradigm (a paradigm which, often tainted by colonialism and imperialism, promotes a vision of spiritual or technological conquest) (Oziwicz, 2017). Instead, speculative fiction challenges normative ideas about reality and questions the materialist claim that nothing exists beyond the phenomenal world. As a result, it exhibits political pluralism, cognitive empowerment, and emotional inspiration. Its borderless and disorderly nature renders it an infinite cloud space within a multicultural world, enabling the rediscovery of marginalised modes of real-world participation.

Just as speculative fiction occupies a borderless and liminal space, islands—both real and imagined—have long been sites of marginalisation, re-examination, re-invention, dis-placement, and re-placement (Grydehøj, 2024; Grydehøj & Su, 2023; Podgorelec et al., 2024). In speculative fiction, space travel is often metaphorically linked to sailing, with interstellar space referred to as a sea of stars. This metaphor echoes the Western colonial tradition of using ships to seek and discover new lands that were often islands. Such a tradition has long been represented in European literature whose island trope, as Stephanos Stephanides and Susan Bassnett (2008) have revealed, serves as a bridge linking reality and imagination, exposes inequalities between centre and periphery, and prompts comparative studies in literature and culture. Moreover, the relationship between islands and continents serves as a powerful metaphor in literature. Katrin Dautel and Kathrin Schödel (2017), when analysing islands in contemporary German literature, note that islands metaphorically address issues of survival, politics, power structures, and gender hierarchies at the semantic level. Meanwhile, at the textual level, islands are transformed into structural features through aesthetic construction, suggesting a re-imagining of “linguistic islands” (Dautel & Schödel, 2017). Finally, as the renowned science fiction critic Darko Suvin has observed, islands can symbolise utopian political futures. Ever since Thomas More’s (2003) *Utopia* (1516) first described the ideal political locale, islands have embodied a fusion of humanistic satire and technological critique, such as in François Rabelais’ (1565) *Gargantua* (1532), and Francis Bacon’s (2016) *New Atlantis* (1626) (Suvin, 1976).

Thus, the study of islands in speculative fiction intersects with cultural geography, political theory, and literary futurology. It unfolds within the concept of relational shifts between islands and continents, the

deconstruction and reconstruction of the East-West binary, and the dynamic interplay between technology and human knowledge systems. As one of the most technologically and socially imaginative forms of literature, speculative fiction positions humanity within a vast coordinate system spanning the local, the global, and even the interstellar. In so doing, it examines and reflects upon the past, present, and future of human civilization—ultimately offering insights that may contribute to a more harmonious and sustainable future.

Building on these themes, this special section explores how islands are represented and imagined in speculative fiction, including science fiction, to uncover the unique qualities that distinguish future-oriented island narratives from their traditional counterparts. The papers included here can be divided into three key thematic categories: (1) islands as liminal spaces for seeking identity and redemption, (2) islands as sites of ecological and economic crisis, and (3) islands as realms of colonial and utopian imaginations.

Mingying Zhou and Xiaohong Zhang's (2025) 'Between realms: The island as a liminal space of redemption and fantasy in *The Tempest* and *Lost*', belonging to the first category, offers a comparative exploration of the island's role as a liminal space, facilitating themes of redemption and transformation. The article examines how islands function as more than physical settings in both *The Tempest* and *Lost*, but as transformative spaces where characters undergo significant psychological, social, and existential changes. It aligns closely with the broad thematic concerns of this special section, which explores how speculative fiction—spanning science fiction, fantasy, and horror—uses islands to foreground liminal experiences. Islands in speculative fiction often blur the boundaries between reality and fantasy, creating spaces where conventional rules are suspended, and characters are forced to confront their deepest fears, desires, and identities. In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare presents the island as a magical realm where characters such as Prospero, Miranda, and Caliban grapple with power, freedom, and identity. Prospero, the ousted Duke of Milan, uses the island as a liminal zone to exact revenge and, ultimately, to reconcile with his past. The island's isolation and magical qualities provide the necessary space for characters to undergo personal transformation, where conventional social hierarchies and norms are dissolved, making way for new moral understandings and self-redefinition. Similarly, the island in *Lost* plays a crucial role in the survivors' evolution. The island functions not just as a geographical space but as an active agent, offering redemption, forcing the characters to face unresolved traumas and undergo emotional and existential growth. The complex narrative structure of *Lost*—with its flashbacks, flash-forwards, and temporal disruptions—further emphasises the island as a place of both physical and temporal liminality, where the characters' understandings of reality and time are continuously challenged. This aligns with the speculative element of this special section's theme, as the island's mysterious qualities push the boundaries of science, blending it with elements of the supernatural. By comparing these two distinct works, the article enhances the theme of islands

as liminal spaces central to speculative fiction. It underlines how islands facilitate not only physical isolation but also a deeper existential experience, where characters are stripped of their societal identities and must confront the raw essence of their humanity. In sum, through the lens of *The Tempest* and *Lost*, the article underscores the symbolic function of islands as places where fantasy, survival, and the human condition intersect, inviting readers to reconsider the complex role islands play in the speculative imagination.

The two papers in the second category (islands as sites of ecological and economic crisis) offer rich insights into how islands function as critical spaces for exploring ecological and economic crises in speculative fiction. These works demonstrate how islands, whether real or imagined, serve as metaphors for broader social, ecological, and economic anxieties. Wang Liao's (2025) article 'The bubble metropolis: Manhattan Island crises in contemporary science fiction' explores Manhattan as a space where economic cycles are metaphorically and literally embodied. The paper investigates the depiction of Manhattan as a 'bubble metropolis' in science fiction, focusing on novels such as *Cities in Flight* (1970), *The Blister* (1975), *Terminal World* (2010), *Zone One* (2011), and *New York 2140* (2017). Each of these works portrays Manhattan as a city caught in cycles of economic growth, collapse, and recovery, functioning as a spatial metaphor for capitalism's rise and fall. The concept of the bubble here reflects both the fragility of the financial systems that fuel urban development and the impending collapse that constantly threatens these metropolises. In *The Blister*, for example, Manhattan is enclosed in a series of domes that not only isolate the city but serve as metaphors for unsustainable economic cycles. The bubble economy, which relies on continuous expansion and investment, mirrors the physical fragility of the dome structures themselves, where a single misstep can lead to collapse. Similarly, *New York 2140* depicts Manhattan as a city submerged by rising sea levels, highlighting the intersection between economic speculation and environmental catastrophe. The island becomes an emblem of both the resilience and the inevitable collapse of capitalist economies, as the wealthy continue to profit from crises while the poor suffer the consequences. Through the lens of these fictional depictions, Liao's analysis presents Manhattan as an archetypal island where human hubris, represented by skyscrapers and massive infrastructure, conflicts with the natural forces of water and economic instability. The island's spatial limitations amplify the impacts of economic bubbles, as there is little room for expansion but immense pressure for financial growth. Liao's paper thus positions Manhattan as a critical site for exploring the intersection of economic and ecological collapse in speculative fiction.

In contrast, Kunyu Wang, Guidan Zhang, and Lucy Drummond's (2023) 'Island, identity, and trauma: The three ecologies of Wu Ming-Yi's *The man with the compound eyes*', examines how a novel addresses ecological and social trauma through the lens of island geography. The novel *The man with the compound eyes*, set on Taiwan's eastern coast, presents a speculative

ecological disaster in which a massive trash vortex collides with the island, wreaking environmental havoc and disrupting the lives of the characters. Wu's portrayal of Taiwan as an island facing ecological collapse highlights the fragility of island ecosystems and the psychological trauma experienced by both human and non-human inhabitants. The authors use Ivakhiv's tri-ecological framework to analyse the novel's portrayal of three intersecting ecological crises: the contamination of the island's natural environment, the destruction of ecocultural identity, and the psychological trauma resulting from environmental colonisation. The novel's dual protagonists—Atile'i, a boy from the fictional island of Wayo Wayo, and Alice, a depressed literature professor—each represent different responses to these crises. Atile'i's survival on the trash vortex and his eventual arrival on Taiwan symbolise the intersection of humanity and ecological disaster, as his traditional way of life is irrevocably altered by the environmental destruction. Meanwhile, Alice's personal trauma, compounded by the loss of her home and the rising sea levels, reflects the broader psychological impact of ecological collapse on island inhabitants. Wu's novel not only critiques the human impact on island ecosystems but also explores the ways in which island communities are particularly vulnerable to the effects of globalisation, industrialisation, and environmental degradation. The destruction of Indigenous cultures and the displacement of coastal communities in the novel serve as metaphors for the broader ecological and psychological damage inflicted by unchecked industrial development. Through the imagery of the trash vortex and the collision with Taiwan, Wu demonstrates how islands can become microcosms of global environmental crises, where the consequences of human activity are felt most acutely.

Together, these two papers illustrate how speculative fiction uses islands as metaphors for ecological and economic crises. In both Manhattan and Taiwan, islands function as confined spaces where external forces—whether economic bubbles or environmental disasters—have disproportionate effects. By analysing islands as sites of ecological and economic crisis, these two papers contribute to the special section's broader exploration of how works of speculative fiction highlight the precarious balance between human ambition and the natural world, suggesting that islands—whether real or imagined—are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of unchecked growth and exploitation.

Our last category concerns islands as realms of colonial and utopian imaginations. The two papers here provide critical insight into how islands are depicted as sites of political, cultural, and national imagination within the context of Japanese and Chinese science fiction. Hui Jiang, Lin Cheng, and Nengying Chen's paper 'Distant country, paradise, wilderness, or mysterious world: The changing image of the South Sea (Nan'yō) islands in Japanese science fiction' examines the portrayal of islands across different historical periods, focusing on Japan's relationship with these islands during its imperial era. The paper, covering the period from the late-19th Century through

World War II to the present day, emphasises how these islands have been reimagined in literature as sites of colonial ambition, utopian fantasy, and exotic otherness. In the late-19th Century, during Japan's expansionist period, the South Sea Islands were portrayed as distant, untamed paradises awaiting Japanese conquest. This image aligns with Japan's political aspirations to expand its influence in the Pacific, drawing from European colonial models. Works from this period depict Japanese protagonists establishing colonies on remote islands, often highlighting the islands' abundant resources and the supposed primitiveness of the Indigenous inhabitants. These narratives project Japan's imperial ambitions, portraying the islands as spaces where Japanese Modernity can assert dominance. By the interwar period, the South Seas are depicted as utopian spaces where Japanese settlers could escape the constraints of mainland society. As the authors note, the islands are romanticised as paradises with idyllic landscapes and abundant resources, while the Indigenous populations are relegated to the role of the exotic Other, requiring Japanese 'civilisation'. This portrayal of the South Seas as a colonial utopia reflects Japan's aspirations for creating a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, wherein the islands could serve as crucial outposts for the Japanese empire. In the post-World War II period, the portrayal of the South Seas in Japanese science fiction takes on a darker, more dystopian tone. The defeat in the Pacific War shattered Japan's colonial dreams, and the islands, once seen as paradises, are now depicted as dangerous, mysterious, and alien. In films like *Godzilla* (1954), the islands become settings for horrific experiments and nuclear fallout, reflecting Japan's postwar anxieties about its imperial past and the destructive consequences of its colonial ambitions. The shift from utopian fantasies of paradise to dystopian fears of danger and alienation underscores how Japan's relationship with the South Sea Islands has mirrored its broader historical trajectory. In the context of speculative fiction, the islands function as metaphors for Japan's fluctuating self-image, from imperial conqueror to postcolonial victim of its own expansionist policies. The analysis thus highlights how islands in Japanese science fiction serve as critical spaces for exploring colonial fantasies, reflecting both national pride and post-imperial disillusionment.

Yuqin Jiang's paper 'Homeland consciousness in Chinese maritime island science fiction' offers a profound intervention into the understudied subgenre of maritime and island-centred Chinese science fiction. Drawing from cultural geography, literary history, and political philosophy, Jiang proposes that a distinctive 'homeland consciousness' animates Chinese maritime science fiction narratives—one that negotiates the tension between continental tradition and oceanic Modernity. This consciousness is articulated through three interconnected modes: political, cultural, and historical. First, Jiang identifies the political mode as a mechanism through which island spaces serve national interests. Unlike Western science fiction's 'mad scientist' trope, Chinese maritime island science fiction often positions the scientist as a patriotic figure whose work, though isolated, is ultimately

in the service of the homeland. The island thus becomes a frontier for technological defence and cultural integrity, exemplified in works such as Tong Enzheng's *The death light on Coral Island* (1978) and Chen Qiufan's *Waste tide* (2013). Here, the ocean becomes a site of both ecological contestation and national protection. Second, Jiang explores the cultural mode, arguing that Chinese maritime island science fiction invokes utopian and spiritual geographies rooted in classical mythology and Daoist cosmology. Islands such as Penglai represent not merely escapist fantasy but culturally encoded aspirations for transcendence and harmony. Stories like Pan Haitian's *Islands of eternity* (1999) and Yin Guang's *Heavenly sea scrolls* (2021) manifest these mytho-utopian traditions while simultaneously deconstructing them, highlighting the fragility of idealism amid modern anxieties. Third, the historical cyclical mode situates homeland consciousness within the *longue durée* of Chinese historiography, particularly Daoist and Confucian cyclical understandings of rise and decline. Through the imagined maritime expansions of Zheng He in Liu Cixin's *The Western ocean* (2014) and Han Song's *Red ocean* (2018), Jiang illustrates how island narratives reinscribe the tension between imperial ambition and the inescapable return to a 'true' homeland. Ultimately, Jiang's article reconceptualises the sea not as a space of conquest but as a mirror through which modern China contemplates its past, reclaims its present, and dreams alternative futures.

Both papers emphasise the role of islands as crucial spaces for exploring national identity, colonial ambitions, and technological progress in speculative fiction. While Japanese science fiction uses islands to project its imperial fantasies and later reflect on the trauma of defeat, Chinese science fiction frames islands as spaces of national rejuvenation and ecological preservation. In both contexts, islands serve as liminal spaces where speculative fiction can explore complex themes of power, identity, and survival. Islands in both Japanese and Chinese science fiction become spaces where national ambitions are projected and contested, reflecting the broader historical and cultural contexts of each nation. Through the lens of speculative fiction, islands serve as powerful metaphors for exploring the limits of human ambition, the consequences of ecological neglect, and the enduring importance of national identity.

Hence, this special section offers a multidimensional exploration of the roles islands play in speculative fiction. Across various literary and cinematic narratives, islands emerge as potent symbols and settings for themes of identity, transformation, ecological crises, and colonial fantasies. The contributions to this special section have collectively demonstrated that islands, whether real or imagined, function as liminal spaces where the boundaries of reality and imagination are blurred, enabling profound reflections on human nature, society, and the environment. In the first thematic category, islands are depicted as spaces of personal and societal redemption, offering characters opportunities for reflection and transformation. In the second category, islands are portrayed as sites of

ecological and economic crisis, where human ambition collides with environmental degradation, highlighting the precarious balance between civilisation and nature. The third category explores the colonial and utopian imaginations of islands in Japanese and Chinese speculative fiction respectively, where islands serve as settings for imperial ambition, cultural identity, and technological progress. Through these diverse perspectives, this special section underscores the island's enduring relevance as a metaphorical and physical space in speculative fiction.

Whether through narratives of crisis, survival, or utopian dreams, islands continue to be powerful symbols of human desires, anxieties, and aspirations. As the world faces unprecedented ecological and social challenges, the island in speculative fiction remains a vital lens through which we can explore the future of humanity, society, and the planet.

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