Christopher Langton
Colony
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The Shared Ecologies of Microbial Life
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In Michael Crichton's 1969 techno-thriller bestseller, *The Andromeda Strain*, a military satellite returning from a US Government mission to collect bacterial samples to develop into biological weapons crashes into an isolated township in Arizona, releasing extra-terrestrial microbes that rapidly, fatally infect the entire town. In Robert Wise's 1971 film adaptation the reconnaissance flight scene, filmed from a helicopter cockpit, shows the town littered with corpses. Tasked with the quest to discover the nature of the deadly agent, two scientists clad in chemical protective suits climb down the helicopter's ladder to survey the scene. Hovering over a grisly slack-jawed corpse, one scientist asks his colleague, 'Coronary?' to which his peer responds, 'I doubt it'.

With their white carapaces forming a protective border against potential threat, the two figures in Christopher Langton's sculptural installation *Colony* could be stand-ins for these perplexed scientists. The astronautical figures tentatively scan the surrounding scene but instead of strewn bodies they witness a fantastical haze of multi-coloured spiky spheres, tubular forms and gelatinous orbs at a scale that dwarfs human proportions – as if the world of microorganisms had stupendously engorged.

Langton refers to these figures as 'aliens', implicitly highlighting the term's structural relation to its antonym 'native'. But if the humanoid forms depicted in this polychrome universe are aliens, does this make the amplified organisms native agents? And if so, then native to where?

Now considered a classic in the annals of alien invasion literature, Crichton's novel was written during the Cold War era and the terror of Communist invasion, recasting the narrative's sci-fi alarmism as symptoms of the zeitgeist's political anxiety: the menacing threat of the Other. As has oft been noted, sci-fi alien invasion narratives can be reductively condensed into a single ultimatum – conquer or be conquered. This logic is evident in litany of precedents from H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* (1897), Jack Finney's *The Body Snatchers* (1956) and its cinematic remakes, John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982) and Oliver Hirschbiegel's *The Invasion* (2007), to name a few. Yet it's an imperative that parallels both military objectives and scenarios of biological warfare.

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One of the 20th centuries most spine-curdling visions of a viral apocalypse did not emerge in the realm of sci-fi fiction but in the field of molecular biology. In 1994 the immunologist Laurie Garrett's *The Coming Plague* was published, quickly becoming a non-fiction bestseller. Garrett's key argument was that microbes possess an extraordinary capacity to evolve, mutate and ultimately become drug-resistant: a thesis developed from meticulous research into the outbreaks of new plagues of the late 20th century including Ebola, Marburg Virus and HIV. The potential spread of such viruses had escalated through varying factors including the excessive use of antibiotics, unpurified drinking water in poverty-stricken nations and massive waves of global migration. Garrett presented a terrifying portrait of drug-resistant bacteria, viruses and parasites – a universal microbial threat of pandemic proportions.

Yet Garrett's vision of a viral apocalypse is at odds with other studies that argue inhabiting a genetically diverse world – counting the microbial level – contrarily serves to maintain the health of human populations by compelling adaption. In Heather Schell's view, 'viruses are no longer seen as intruders. Generated within our own cells, they are essential elements of human evolution, a meaningful and ever-present part of a larger ecosystem.'[1] In light of this, we might view *Colony*'s constellation of mucilaginous forms as cellular structures of our own internal microbiota or molecular strands of human DNA. Who the enemy might be then, is not so clear. Concomitantly, waging warfare might be counterproductive.

In *Brain Plague* (2000), a sci-fi novel written by the microbiologist Joan Slonczewski, human brains become the planetary environments for colonising microorganisms. Originating from a distant planet, these microbes live in symbiosis with their human hosts, enhancing their mental agility. An artist named Chrys consents to a neurological experiment allowing her brain to become the host for a colony of architect microbes who augment her creative intelligence, ameliorating her flagging career. Slonczewski's speculative scenario is an optimistic view of a post-human world based on cooperative relations, where intellectual and artistic agency is shared between human and microorganisms to mutual benefit.

Colony, with its assemblage of variegated microbial forms, might then incarnate a vision of a shared universe that questions the binary divisions of self/other or alien/native. Its landscape of miscellaneous polychrome structures beckons us to consider that we are all multi-cellular symbiotic organisms, negotiating a shared ecology.

[1] Heather Schell, 'The Sexist Gene: Science Fiction and the Germ Theory of History', American Literary History, Vol. 14 No. 4, Winter 2002, p. 824

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