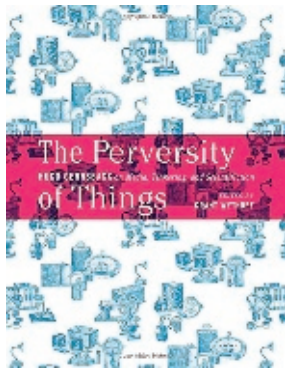


frequently depicting pulp paperback editions, as lurid as they are beautiful, in their stark, lo-fi glory. Both collections would have benefitted from an index covering, amongst other taxonomies, the themes and settings of the material discussed, useful for teachers and researchers in the field, although both authors do provide a select bibliography of the main authors discussed, and offer advice throughout on tracking down more obscure volumes.

I hope that these texts play a part in the rediscovery of unfairly maligned writers and help encourage the reprinting of their works in high quality editions. Many of the authors with whom Barrett and Howard are concerned have limited works available through Amazon, for example, largely in small press editions, but surely deserve to be enshrined in the Penguin Classics series as bigger names such as Lord Dunsany, Ashton Smith and Lovecraft have been. Ultimately, Barrett and Howard's collections are key reading for those already initiated into the pleasures of exploring Weird fiction wishing to pursue this interest further and to expand their reading more widely. As Barrett says of the task of hunting down Grege La Spina's work, reading both *Doors to Elsewhere* and *Touchstones* 'is a pleasure that may be reserved for the few, but which nonetheless will bring much satisfaction to those who make the effort'.



Grant Wythoff, ed. *The Perversity of Things: Hugo Gernsback on Media, Tinkering, and Scientifiction* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016, 444pp, £28.99)

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer (University of Liverpool)

Part of a series called 'Electronic Mediations', *The Perversity of Things* offers a way into understanding Hugo Gernsback, variously the creator of the 'idea of science fiction' (Gary Westfahl) or a charlatan of 'stultifying vision and lack of literary taste' (Richard Bleiler). Here, we are less concerned with Gernsback and *Amazing Stories* as establishing the tone of US science fiction during the first part of the last century, and more with Hugo (occasionally 'Huck') Gernsbacher, the dapper German-Jewish émigré from Luxembourg who saw the future beginning to arrive in the USA. A poor student and something of a gambler, he landed in New York in 1904 at the age of nineteen with the design for a new dry cell battery and formed the Electro Importing Company to promote wireless and electrical equipment. The company's catalogue became *Modern Electrics*, which was already promoting

speculative and futuristic claims before Gernsback's launch in 1914 of *The Electrical Experimenter* (later *Science and Invention*) which began to illustrate the new future with the work of Frank R. Paul and Howard V. Brown. On the way, Gernsback saw science fiction forming and jumped in to claim it. Myths (many self-created) cluster around him. *The Perversity of Things* tries to untangle some of these myths, and to argue that Gernsback's own writing and publishing are part of the myth of progress he wanted to create.

While we are shown much about how Gernsback promoted 'scientifiction' in his magazines, we are also given examples of his own fiction, such as extracts from *Ralph 124C41+* (1911) and stories such as 'The Magnetic Storm' (1918). While *Ralph* (whatever judgement might be made of its literary qualities) is essential reading for anyone with the slightest interest in how the science fiction of today became what it is, the other fiction takes some time to get into. Even so, once the suspicious reader has taken the plunge and decided to brave the often wooden plotting and the way the story serves as engineering fantasy of the highest order (a footnote to 'The Magnetic Storm' proudly boasts that 'the cited experiments and effects of the Tesla currents are actual facts checked by Mr Tesla himself, who saw the proofs of this story'), these fictions show themselves up as fascinating documents. If the speculative essays such as '10,000 Years Hence' (1922), with impressive illustrations showing 'one of the future cities of about the size of New York floating high up in the air, several miles above the Earth', still live as remarkable fantasies about the future, the way stories such as 'The Magnetic Storm' serve as sugar-coated essays about technology are equally noteworthy. 'Why' Sparks, the young boy-genius of the latter story is a dime-novel echo of Ralph, but the interrogative which is his nickname is a classic reminder of the 'unending quest for knowledge', which is the tinkerer/inventor's burning passion.

The non-fiction selected for inclusion in *Perversity* ranges from the entertainingly speculative squib to the earnest textbook material for the hobbyist. For the former, we have 'Wireless on Mars' (1909), an amusing extrapolation of wireless transmission in which our Martian inventor has perfected a method of transporting matter through the ether, and (what I suspect many readers of *Foundation* would require) the 'Bookworm's Nurse' (1915), a simple device to enable avid readers to walk down the street in all weathers and traffic conditions and keep their attention focused upon their book. For the latter, we have 'Television and the Telephot' (1909), an early description of television (and forecast of the videophone), exhortations such as 'What to Invent' (1916) or detailed descriptions of Gernsback's own inventions, such as the 'Detectorum' and the 'Pianorad' (both 1926). Reading the book page by page can, for some, be a slog: the appearance of circuit diagrams explaining obsolete technology

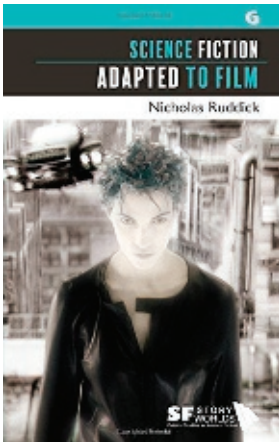
and didactic pieces of fiction such as the extract from *Baron Münchhausen's New Scientific Adventures* (1915), in which Gernsback flags passages containing *actual scientific facts* by means of typographical symbols. Skipping through the book at random, however, or paying attention to the editor's suggestion that there is more than one way to access its contents pays dividends. A double set of contents pages offer a thematic approach as well as a chronological one, so that it is possible to access all Gernsback's writings on television, say, or all his fiction with ease; or it is possible simply to trace his remarkably fertile thought from Gernsback's first published piece, for *Scientific American* in 1905, through to 'Wonders of the Machine Age' (1931).

Either way, the reader stumbles upon material which ranges from the thought-provoking to the gloriously quirky. 'The Perversity of Things' (1916), possibly owing something to Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Imp of the Perverse' (1845), shows how even the most meticulous plans fall apart because of that annoying habit of materials not to do what they are supposed to do. In 'Hearing Through Your Teeth' (1916), Gernsback begins: 'The following interesting experiment can be performed by anyone who has an ordinary disc phonograph'. For those who *have* such an item of ancient technology about their persons, it is apparently possible to hear the music of a disc being played on the turntable by means of a darning-needle held between the teeth and pressed onto the disc. Wythoff points out in a long footnote (one of the most valuable aspects of the book consists of the detailed contextual notes) that the same issue contains an episode of *Baron Münchhausen* in which the apparently telepathic communication among Martians works by means of something very similar. We are even urged again to try the same experiment.

The mixture of playfulness and sober – even obsessive – attention to detail is typical. To run through each issue of *The Electrical Experimenter* is, says Wythoff, 'to watch the activities of a quirky group of hobbyists grow into a mass cultural phenomenon'. The word 'geek' meant something very different in Gernsback's time, but one thinks of it here, and thinks of the thousands of his readers who were genuinely believing that these amazing new technologies would improve the world.

Does *The Perversity of Things* rehabilitate the man who was known to some of his contemporaries as 'Hugo the Rat'? Not quite, because in his determination not to let the obsession of literary critics get the better of Gernsback, Wythoff overlooks the fact that some of his early victims had every right to be aggrieved. 'Spectacularly racist' H.P. Lovecraft might have been, but it was Gernsback's famous unwillingness to pay on time that caused the epithet. 'One can be forgiven for wondering why such singular attention has gone toward bankruptcy proceedings, profits and wages in works of literary scholarship,' writes Wythoff.

A professional writer might have given an answer. But Wythoff is right to point out that Gernsback's championing of 'tinkering' was something important. Like science fiction itself, a literature that crystallized into a 'named' form pointed to by a man who was thinking on his feet in order to make a quick buck, the process of invention in the early twentieth century was hardly the most upmarket of activity. Gernsback, Wythoff argues, was not an Edison or a Steve Jobs. His relationship with his hobbyist readers was, however, that of a builder of a community. Just as his Science Fiction League was later to legitimize in the eyes of science fiction fans the *activity* of being a science fiction reader, so his hobbyist magazines gave people a sense of participating in the world that was being created by those *real* analogues of Ralph 124C41+. Gernsback's 'theory of amateur tinkering as an activity distinct from, and even superior to, "invention" by credentialed researchers and engineers' may have suffered from the same flaws as his theory of scientifiction as something that would inspire its readers to go out and *create* that future about which they were reading, but both those theories were about communities and change. *The Perversity of Things* argues that Gernsback and his self-created community is worth more than our patronizing half-attention. It is a fascinating, entertaining and valuable book.



Nicholas Ruddick, *Science Fiction Adapted to Film* (Gylphi, 2016, 380pp, £18.99)

Reviewed by Sue Smith

In the foreword to his book, Nicholas Ruddick states that he is 'unapologetically subjective' when it comes to exploring 'how sf novels, novellas, and short stories worth reading' are adapted into 'films worth watching'. In particular, Ruddick's approach favours science fiction literature over what he calls the 'aesthetically inferior' world of film. As he confesses: 'For me, the

literature will always come first'. Nonetheless, despite Ruddick's aesthetic bias, he also argues that for the purpose of his book he is more motivated by 'what makes for a successful adaptation than by 'the desire to assert one medium over another'. Ruddick's hierarchy of literature over film, therefore, is a rhetorical strategy with which to flesh out and explore the tensions inherent within adaptation studies, such as the professional and cultural differences and biases that continue to prevail between the fields of science fiction literature and film. Ruddick's aim is not merely to simplify but rather to create a specific critical