



A review of
**Angela Carter's
Pyrotechnics:
A Union of Contraries**

Kirill Melnikov

Angela Carter's *Pyrotechnics: A Union of Contraries* is a collection of essays that seeks to highlight and study the explosive beauty of Angela Carter's fiction as various media and art forms, visual and sound devices, material objects and points of view converge in a single firework-like blast in which every spark becomes a piece of a complex pattern.

The volume is composed of four parts that tackle different aspects of Carter's writing: the first one provides insight into the relationship between signs and objects found in her works; the second explores the musical and performative aspects of her fairy-tale narratives; the third part tackles the various visual devices she employs throughout her career; and, finally, the fourth part draws attention to the striking materiality of Carter's culinary and corporeal depictions.

The collection's introduction is written by its editors, Marie Mulvey-Roberts and Charlotte Crofts, who highlight Carter's use of explosive metaphors that enchant and captivate her readers while representing the disruption of the existing social and political systems. Recalling Carter's interest in the foreign words *hanabi* and *feux d'artifice* ('fireworks' in Japanese and French), the editors employ both the Eastern and Western pyrotechnic practices as their conceptual framework to re-appraise Carter's literary craftsmanship fuelled by her fiery inventiveness.

The first part of the collection opens with Natsumi Ikoma's exploration of how Angela Carter's stay in Japan highlighted her ability to grasp and interpret the different 'signs' on a purely visual level, leading her to perceiving that ideas and expectations hold precedence over real individuals in Japanese lifestyle and to a realisation that such precedence is not foreign to her. Ikoma then establishes a connection between Japanese art forms like the *bunraku* puppet theatre and *irezumi* tattoos and Carter's fiction, showing the British writer's confrontation with her own Orientalist attitudes as well as her development as a feminist. This is followed by David Punter's analysis of signs and art in Carter's *Love* (1971), in which Annabel, a young woman who sees the world from an 'expressionist' point of view, is drained of life by her own encroaching mythic images of objects, the ever-

increasing detachment from the world around her resulting in a radical alienation that characterises the novel's psychopathology.

The second part of the collection focuses on the performativity of Angela Carter's writing as well as on its musicality, opening with Polly Paulusma's piece in which she talks about Carter's fascination with the traditional folk music genre. Paulusma guides her readers through a wealth of evidence such as Carter's vinyls, notations, notebooks, essays, and articles, showing that folk music was always a big part of Carter's life. Paulusma then highlights the integration of folk music elements in Carter's fiction, underlining her use of recurring figures and motifs of folk songs (most notably the greenwood locus), but also the presence of folk-related audial elements that account for the distinctive musicality of Carter's texts. The next chapter features Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère's uncovering of a previously unexplored intertext to 'The Bloody Chamber' and 'The Tiger's Bride'. She shows how the experience of translating Perrault's fairy tales has shaped Carter's perception of this genre, pointing out the connection between those two short stories and Perrault's 'La Marquise de Salusses ou la Patience de Griselidis' ('Griselada' in English), with all three narratives portraying a despotic aristocrat of a husband attempting to condition his wife into submission, but each tale achieving a different effect. The final chapter of this part brings to light yet another hidden intertext to *The Bloody Chamber*, with Ashley Riggs demonstrating how Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* echoes throughout this famous short story collection. Pain and pleasure, subjugation and martyrdom, disembodied voices and voiceless bodies all constitute a part of the inter-centurial critical dialogue between the German composer and the British writer in an explosive display of radical transformations in music and literature.

The penultimate part of the collection delves into the visual aspect of Carter's writing, opening with Belinda Locke's comparative case study of two Australian theatrical adaptations of Carter's short stories. The eloquent language riddled with metaphors and symbolism, the many references to music, the mesmerising descriptions of the narrative's world all pose a challenge to adapting the two stories for stage, and Locke's detailed study highlights some of the creative choices the directors had to face as they took on a task of translating Carter's purple prose into intense visual performances. Scott A. Dimovitz then follows up with an inspection of the surrealist apocalypticism in Carter's works, arguing that her engagement with this genre stemmed from the fear of nuclear annihilation during the Cold War period. Dimovitz uses Carter's interviews, notes, footnotes, and scribbles in margins to show how her emotions towards the potential apocalypse shifted between fear, anger, hope, resignation and more, her fiction reflecting these different attitudes and allowing her to explore the post-apocalyptic Year One. Caleb Sivyver's chapter

comes next, featuring a comprehensive examination of the many optical devices in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*. Devices such as kaleidoscopes, daguerreotypes, stereoscopes, and peep-shows, to name a few, enable the protagonist of the novel to assume the patriarchal position of the sovereign spectator, the novel thus exposing the dominant optical regime. This part is concluded with Béatrice Bijon's chapter that proposes an anamorphic approach to reading Carter's work, creating a conversation between the British writer and the surrealist painter Paula Rego. Both women, Bijon shows, create highly disturbing scenes, displacing their readers' and viewers' gaze while forcing them to confront the most disconcerting forms of familial relationships.

The final part of the collection begins with Maria José Pires's mouthwatering description of the two Carter-inspired gastronomic events that took place in May 2017 and allowed for multi-sensory and immersive experiences, highlighting the culinary features of Carter's writing. Carys Crossen's chapter then explores the function of clothing and lack thereof in several of Carter's texts, suggesting that human identity is a performance in itself, with some of her characters preferring to abandon their humanity altogether rather than spend their lives playing a role. Finally, Zoe Brennan closes the collection as she looks at Carter's *Wise Children*, examining the way the Chance sisters resist the ageist dominant discourses by remaining sexually active, publicly visible thanks to their make-up and clothing, and by adopting their nephew's children, thus continuing to be involved in their family's affairs.

This truly pyrotechnic book brings together various qualities of Angela Carter's fiction, exploring its musicality, materiality, performativity, and its visual aspects in a firework-like explosion, and showcasing the intricate web of references, influences and intertexts hidden in her fiction. Assembling chapters by scholars of different disciplines from all over the world, this collection provides new and insightful ways of reading Carter that will undoubtedly interest both her longtime fans and readers who have only just discovered her.

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