

Science Fiction: A Basic Sketch (1987–1994)

Note 2020: I was often asked for a (somewhat paradoxically) comprehensive introductory sketch on SF, and first wrote it for a Beograd conference in 1987, and then redid it for a French and an Italian venue, its final form being my Introduction to the Chung-Wai [Taipei] issue on SF edited by me in 1994. It says nothing I did not write earlier, but has perhaps the advantage of synopticity.

I. Introduction

The presence of Science Fiction (further SF – NOT “sci-fi”!) has risen sharply in some leading industrial nations over the last 100–125 years, regardless of local and short-range fluctuations. This fictional genre has particularly affected some social strata important beyond their numbers, such as university graduates and young writers. It moves easily between the highest “canonic” literature and the lowest non-canonic mass consumption. It has the advantage of posing some fundamental paradoxical questions; and to begin with, “What is SF”?

More clearly than in most other cases, the corpus of SF is determined by its definition: the history and theory of this literary genre are in a feedback relation. On one chronological end, when does SF begin? On the other, what is to be considered as SF today? There is no unanimity on these questions among scholars. My position – that SF is the fiction of cognitive estrangement – necessarily recognizes as early SF all utopian fiction, most “extraordinary voyages,” as well as many cognate genres dating back to (for example) Plato’s *Commonwealth*, Lucian of Samosata, Morus, Cyrano, and Swift. This problem may be bypassed by acknowledging that at the time of

bourgeois revolutions, prominently including the industrial one, the usual loci of SF – in the past or in space – come by the nineteenth century to be supplemented by the future seen as a fourth dimension (e.g., in H.G. Wells's *Time Machine*); and that this imaginative shift, consubstantial with life under capitalism, is so fundamental that it colors the whole SF chronotope, even where that (as still in Verne or the early interplanetary adventures) continues to be ostensibly located in space, or indeed where it returns to the past (as in Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court* or in the SF sub-genre of "prehistoric fiction"). Thus a corpus may be found – whether called "The Shift to Anticipation" as in Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, or SF *tout court* as in Scholes-Rabkin – whose *terminus a quo* is the ambiguous cluster of writings of the age of democratic revolutions. This corpus would begin with the rhapsodies to radical novelty of Sébastien Mercier's *l'An 2440* and Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* as well as the recoil from it of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and some of Poe's stories. In such a generally acceptable approach, the resulting SF corpus may be divided into pre-modern and modern, with Wells as the turning point between Newtonian and Einsteinian chronotopes, between an anticipatory pretense at extrapolation and frankly analogical alternative Possible Worlds.

However, the above compromise does not solve the graver genre problems of how to delimit SF from (at the lower end) horror fantasy or "heroic fantasy" à la Tolkien, as well as from (at the higher end) some verisimilar parables by the authors of *The Penal Colony* and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis tertius" – Kafka and Borges. While the upper end remains theoretically unsolved (e.g., are the later works by Stanisław Lem or indeed the Beatles' movie *The Yellow Submarine* to be included into SF?), the lower end of the present-day value-scale is an empirically graver problem, since the genre of "Fantasy" is in the dominant consumerist practice often sold together with SF, earlier under the name of SF and now of "speculative fiction." This is a contemporary problem, beginning with the retreat from capitalist and bureaucratic rationalism that gathered steam after the 1960s and culminated in a "Post-Modern" theory – and in some cases practice – of fiction which denies the very possibility of such delimitations (see more in Chapter 23). While acknowledging that all definitions operate only within a pre-set framework of pertinence for given purposes, so that they

are not eternal but sociohistorical, this chapter will assume that it does not make sense to confuse H.P. Lovecraft or the Surrealists with Robert A. Heinlein, the Strugatsky Brothers, or Ursula K. Le Guin. The fact that none of them use the verisimilitude of nineteenth-century Realism is too flimsy as a classificatory basis; and this is not altered by the existence of grey zones and uncouth hybrids.

Finally, sociologically and ideologically SF literature is primarily important as a testing ground and repertory creator for the much more widespread – and as a rule hugely inferior – SF comics, movies, and TV serials. However, the texture and horizons of these forms is so different (e.g., most SF movies are really horror movies) that they cannot be considered here.

2. Social History

Significant constituents of SF began to move toward mass ideological and commercial status in nineteenth-century Europe: juvenile SF in French family magazines, the Future War in British and then European pamphlets and booklets, political anticipations in the extreme Left and Right wings battling the bourgeois present (Émile Souvestre, Nikolai Chernyshevsky, William Morris), scientifico-“utopian” speculations in a very popular cluster culminating in Wells (Camille Flammarion, Kurd Lasswitz, Rosny Ainé, and followers all over the continent). European SF continued to produce until the 1940s original and sometimes popular writers building on Verne and Wells (Paul Scheerbart, A.A. Bogdanov, Karel Čapek, Alexei Tolstoy, S.I. Witkiewicz, Karin Boye). Yet a permanently viable commercial genre – which baptized itself as SF – was developed in the twentieth-century USA: first in pulp magazines for teenagers (as of the 1910s) and then in mass-market paperbacks (in the 1940s). The US tradition had popular native precursors, both in the utopias of Edward Bellamy and in the juvenile adventure serials. After the World Wars, it flooded and overwhelmed almost all the other national traditions, though some of them resisted by censorship (USSR after 1928) or by keeping popular SF in dialog with a tenuous but real “high-lit” or

philosophical SF (e.g., Olaf Stapledon, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, Naomi Mitchison, and others in the UK.).

Some light on who are the readers of US SF has been shed both by sociological research and by attempts at its theorization. This research is still very initial and narrow: to begin with, nobody except perhaps some jealously secretive publishers of books and magazines has even estimated the readership's size – is it 100,000? is it in millions? Nonetheless, since the profile of US readers seems exemplary, even when occasionally more extreme, for European and Japanese readers too, and since there is practically no mass circulation of SF literature – as distinct from comics and mass media – in the South of our planet, the US readers shall here be discussed as a “typical” population in the Lukácsian sense, where it does not imply the average but the latent historical tendency. There is strong evidence that SF fans constitute a veritable subculture with a flourishing communication network of innumerable fanzines (fan magazines) and yearly conferences, in permanent dialogue with and serious pragmatic influence on the SF editors and writers. Between 1949 and 1974, at least a self-selected more active core of the fandom presented the following parameters (cf. Mullen-Suvin eds., 1978: 238 seqq., and in particular the article by Albert Berger): its reading of SF began at age 8–13; it is predominantly young, with 40–60 percent being up to age 24 and only ca. 15 percent over age 40; it has apparently shifted between the dates mentioned from more strictly scientific professional orientation to a majority oriented toward social sciences and humanities (natural science seems to account for 10–20 percent of the fans within the 50 percent in professional and technical employments); it is predominantly male, though the proportion of female readers rose after the 1960s from ca. 1/10 to ca. 1/3 parallel to the just mentioned professional (and ideological) shift as well as to the emergence of first-class female SF writers; it is in its majority urban, living in cities over 250,000 inhabitants; the average number of titles (books or magazines) read is seven per month. Perhaps most revealing are the indications that a major part of adult SF readers had an appreciably higher university-level education and a much higher income (possibly two or three times higher!) than the average White individual in the USA. Furthermore, rightly or wrongly this major part consider themselves upwardly mobile and having a high degree of say in

their jobs. To the contrary, though we have no ethnic statistics, it is clear that manual workers, Black and other ethnic minorities, the rural population, and to a decreasing extent women, are seriously under-represented in the US SF readership.

Hypotheses such as Gérard Klein's which, taking into account mainly the ideal reader inscribed in the best SF itself, consider the hegemonic social fraction to which SF is as a rule addressed – and whose destinies are this genre's horizons – to be the "scientifically and technologically oriented middle-class" (ibidem 246), seem to be solidified by such data. However, their fragmentary basis not only requires much more systematic work but also inner differentiations between, say, omnivorous and active fanatics vs. occasional readers. Most important, the various ideological wings, ranging from feminists and Left utopians to high officers of the US armed forces and a burgeoning sub-group of "mercenary SF," would have to be separated out.

There seem then to be three main and overlapping literate US groups that *do not* read SF: the passive; the traditional anti-technological humanists; and those content with the momentary status quo. A better definition of the social bearer of SF would have to say, I think, that it is a cluster or congeries of fractions within that part of the upper half of the socioeconomic US pyramid which is allied with the new economic and technological sectors of tertiary or "service industry" – media and education – and employed women as well as university and high-school students. This cluster's peculiar in-between social position is the basis of the rapid ideological shifts in SF, most clearly the sudden veering from the radical rebelliousness of the leading 1961–74 writers to the conformism and privatization in the last fifteen years (cf. Fitting). Characteristically, this has been accompanied by the retreat of many writers – for example, Heinlein – from the more sophisticated SF readership to a bid for Hollywood film rights and the minimum common denominator of bestseller readership, as well as to a blurring of the lines toward horror and heroic Fantasy. Both of these orientations are strongly counterproductive as regards SF quality.

A special case was the Soviet (mainly the Russian) SF evolution. It was largely – though never wholly – cut off from the world SF market by both outside and inside pressures. It started from common European roots in the nineteenth-century popular SF, and developed in the pioneering and

well-informed Leninist 1920s toward an alternative profile of its own with strong political overtones and a bridging of the divide between popular and avant-garde writings (e.g., in the splendid plays of Vladimir Mayakovsky and stories of Andrey Platonov). However, Evgeniy Zamyatin's dystopian *My (We)* had already been refused publication in 1921, and a general suppression of SF began ca. 1928, which reduced the genre in the mid-1930s to a juvenile literature of "the nearest aim," that is, technological popularization and nationalism. The Khrushchevian "thaw" was consummated in SF by Ivan Efremov's *Tumannost' Andromedy (The Andromeda Nebula, 1958)*, which opened the way for a series of writers among whom Arkadiy and Boris Strugatsky are clearly dominant, though one should also mention Ilya Varshavsky, Anatoly Dneprov, Genrikh Al'tov, Dmitriy Bilenkin, Sever Gansovsky, Gennadiy Gor, Olga Larionova, Igor Rosokhovatsky, Andrei Siniavsky, Vadim Shefner (cf. Suvin, *Metamorphoses* and *Russian*, Britikov, CASS, Nudelman). The profile of Soviet SF readers seemed, on the basis of even scantier data, similar to the US one but with a greater connection to mainstream fiction and interest in ideological novelty. The mid-1960s brought about renewed censorship; after courageous battles, much of Soviet SF retreated – in interesting though not identical synchrony with US retreats – toward the native folktale tradition.

3. Poetics

I have argued repeatedly that SF is a literary genre the necessary and sufficient conditions for which are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition. This means that the defining specificity of SF is the textual hegemony of narrative chronotopes (spatiotemporal locations) and/or agents radically different in respect to the norms dominant in the author's – and the ideal reader's – society, and yet cognitively not impossible in respect to a materialist causality. I have elliptically called these two parameters estrangement, which delimits SF from "realistic" or "empirically mimetic" genres, and cognition, which differentiates SF from the other non-"realistic" genres. The main formal device of SF, flowing out of

the attitude of estrangement, is therefore an imaginative framework or Possible World alternative to the author's empirical environment.

Claiming for SF an estrangement analogous to the epistemological stance of the sciences does not at all mean that it is or could be simply scientific vulgarization or even technological prognostication, in which it engaged with Jules Verne, USA between the World Wars or USSR under Stalinism. This remains a lower, if at times legitimate, stage of SF. Even Verne's *roman scientifique* was successful with readers just approaching SF because it introduces into the known world only one easily digestible new technological variable. The resulting euphoria is real but limited, best suited to juvenile readers. Such a "novel of science" has a structure of ephemeral estrangement, more proper to the mystery story than to SF. On the contrary, the typical approach of the best SF, its cognition, is a reflecting on reality. It is neither futurological nor scientific; better, it is critical.

SF has, of course, its own repertory of functions and devices (cf. Delany, Jameson, Lem, Parrinder, Rose, and Wolfe), which for all its historical changeability possesses a stable nucleus in that all the estranging devices of this genre are in feedback with the cognition aimed for. They are all the building blocks of a significant novum or strange newness (novelty, innovation), which changes crucially important aspects of the story's Possible World by constituting that story's paradigm, model or encompassing trope (see Suvin *Metamorphoses*, chap. 4, and *Positions*, chap. 13). This change may be simply playful, but in the most significant cases it will be wedded to a hope of finding out a radically better environment, tribe, institution, intelligence or other representation of the Supreme Good – or to a fear of and revulsion from its contrary. Here I can only briefly allude to one determining parameter, the relationship between the type of Possible World proper to a given literary genre and the "zero world" corresponding to the author's empirically verifiable environment (or more precisely, to the dominant notions about it). In the works of "realism," which are supposed to directly correspond to the empirical world, ethics has no direct relation to physics. To the contrary, the worlds of the non-"realistic" genres such as the myth, "Fantasy" or fairy tale are actively oriented toward the protagonist. A fairy tale or folktale is defined by the triumph of the protagonist, to whom its world supplies the necessary magical arms and helpers. Symmetrically

obverse, the horror Fantasy – a laicization of the tragic myth just as the folktale derives from the myth of the victorious hero – is characterized by the protagonist's atrocious helplessness. However, nothing in the laws of an SF Possible World is ethically oriented toward its narrative agents. The basic "reading contract" or *vraisemblance* of SF does not a priori guarantee the protagonists' success or failure (though this may be modified by ideological "protocols" superadded to it in particular sub-forms such as utopian and dystopian SF). Insofar as the Possible Worlds of SF are neutral toward their inhabitants, it shares with "high" literature a mature approach analogous to that of modern science and philosophy, and the non-predetermined chronotopic horizons of this approach.

4. Retrospect: Potentialities, Contradictions, and Horizons

This sketch, which deals mainly with the general horizons of the genre, should, no doubt, be supplemented by a series of particular sociohistorical discourses. Thus, the various national SF traditions as well as the various thematic nuclei and sub-genres of SF (from the space opera to the imaginary book-review, from aliens to supermen and robots) would have to be systematically envisaged. Further, on a higher rung of synthesis, the history of SF could most usefully be seen as the result of two conflicting tendencies. The first one is an esthetic cognition potentially implicit in the genre and evident in all of its significant writers, which is allied to the rise of subversive social groups and their need for more developed productive forces and better relations of production, as basis for a safer living. The second one is a tendency toward mystifying escapism dominant in the second-rate (that is the majority of) SF, and due to the pressures of the ideological hegemony. This infiltrates even the masters in the form of the catastrophism of Mary Shelley and Wells, the positivism of Verne, the agnosticism of Lem, the "world-reduction" (Jameson, "World") and individualistic characterization in Le Guin, the existentialist symbolism of the Strugatskys, etc. The ascendancy of a consistent fictional cognition makes for its fertile blend with the ludic pleasures of estrangement.

Contrariwise, when productivity and cognition are treated by a declining social class not as fundamentals of creativeness but as means of domination, estrangement is degraded to surface sensationalism.

In SF this tension can be clearly seen for it has been, from its constitution within the system of literary genres for the mass market, exiled into a “reservation” for the fans, a commercial ghetto. This protective isolation was at the beginning probably beneficial, allowing the genre to develop as an autonomous entity. However, the fact that most fans in North America and western Europe read no other literature soon – at the latest by the 1960s – became stultifying, since it meant cutting SF off from normal confrontation and comparison with the best written in other forms and genres of fiction. The gap between the highest realizations of the genre and the lamentable and often vitiated narratives which (as in all other genres) make up over 90 percent of current production has since that time grown ever huger. It could probably be shown how models extraneous to the *telos* of SF came to hobble its potentials. The model of scientific vulgarization – and its refurbished variant of pseudo-futurology – has already been mentioned. Individualist sub-literature (most clearly the Western, but also the mystery thriller) and occultist Fantasy would be more important in the last thirty years. From Hugo Gernsback and E.R. Burroughs, the founders of the mass-market SF, to Isaac Asimov’s “psychohistory” and Frank Herbert’s Jungian supermen, a pseudo-magical hocus-pocus deforms some of the best-known SF works and reduces all of its horizons to the monotony of either the *status quo* or Death. SF temporality is then reduced to a point consciousness or an ahistorical abstraction, and its daydreams turn to incoherent nightmares or melodramas rather than warnings or celebrations. The clear devolution of current SF in the US-dominated market could be directly linked to the enormous ideological and economic pressures of its TV and Hollywood abuses under the drastic turn to the Right since the mid-1970s. In that desert, only a few series of oases remain – in the USA, mainly the feminist SF and its indirect descendants, and partly “cyberpunk” (cf. Suvin, “On Gibson”). But investigations to constitute such particular critical discourses largely remain to be done.

Nevertheless, the best SF – often found in the works of Heinlein, Clifford Simak, the Strugatsky Brothers, Lem, Le Guin, Philip K. Dick,

Tom Disch, Samuel Delany, Norman Spinrad, J.G. Ballard, Klein, Michel Jeury, the spouses Braun (in the GDR), Marge Piercy, C.J. Cherryh, William Gibson, Octavia Butler, K.S. Robinson – has always, with greater or smaller precision, aimed at the power systems which prevent the hominization of people, at the true violent demonology of the war, the alienating market, and despotic rule. In that wider sense, the “absent paradigms” (Angenot) of each SF narration necessarily lead it to function as a parable: *de nobis* – or better, *de possibilibus pro nobis fabula narratur* (the story tells of our possibilities). SF is then a parabolic mirror based on an “other” chronotope and suggested by a system of typical narrative agents. Significant SF presupposes (beyond technical coherence and felicity) more complex and wider cognitions: it shows primarily the political, psychological, and anthropological use and effect of a novum, and the becoming and failure of new Possible Worlds as a result of it. Once the elastic criteria of literary structuring have been met, a cognitive element (the novum, often constructed from within the human sciences) becomes a measure of the esthetic quality, of the specific pleasure to be sought in SF.

Bibliography

The secondary literature is immense and of most varied quality. The scholarly journal *Science-Fiction Studies*, 1973ff., is recommended for both original articles and reviews which attempt to keep pace with world criticism, also the excellent Clute encyclopedia and the Tynm annual surveys below. All general historical and theoretical literature up to and including 1976 may be found in Suvin *Metamorphoses*. Secondary literature on Russian SF up to and including 1974 may be found in Suvin *Russian*. These items will as a rule be omitted in the following Bibliography.

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