

Darko Suvin

**ON FAKE (DEATH-DEALING) VS. TRUE (LIFE-AFFIRMING) NOVUMS** (2021, 2,500 words)

Abstract: Overview of novum; we need radically liberating novums only;\_differentiations within the novum – graph and comment;

Keywords: novum, true novum, fake novum, liberating novum, semantics, political epistemology, singularity, event

*1. OVERVIEW 2020*

In previous works, beginning with *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979/2016), I've defined the Novum as the main plot device of SF, including utopian fiction, a central factor of their cognitive strategy of perception-cum-evaluation based on a radical desire and swerve away from the ruling encyclopedia of facts and relationships. But then I proceeded to doubt a univocal use of the Novum as simply a “progressive” element in the 1990s, since evidence of sorely regressive Novums was becoming unmistakable after the coming to power of Right-wing politics with Reagan and Thatcher (Suvin, 2010a: Chapter 8). That evidence grew overwhelming also concerning the uses and abuses of science: the novums of institutionalised science and its technology have a huge stake in war, in killing and maiming people. The popular emblem of SF, the large space rocket, was developed and used mainly by competing genocidal armies. Science as institution has been largely subsumed into the economy of overripe capitalism, whose systematic dependence on weapons production, as well as on strip-mining human ecology for centuries into the future, shapes a productive system on the whole supremely wasteful, irrational, and death-bearing. I therefore proceeded to write quite a bit on the divorce of wisdom and knowledge, which I named Science<sub>1</sub> vs. Science<sub>2</sub> (Suvin 2010b: pp. 68-101).

To base novums on formally indubitable innovation as hegemonised by modern science grew quite untenable after its own overarching novum became the transformation of Science<sub>2</sub> -- official and humongously well-financed knowledge -- into capital: and I investigated at length what clearly happened when this was force-fed by much Rightwing publishing money into “hard” SF, the “space cadets” of imperialist warfare (Suvin 2005: p. 107). Now it is becoming evident for

all, in the present covidisation pandemic and its economico-political use, that Science is split between the wisdom of virology and continued exploitation at immediate risk of life of most women, “essential” workers, and a great majority of officially “non-Whites,” where technology can mean the quick and often horribly painful end of life for literally millions of “lower” human lives deemed, in the frank Nazi language, unworthy to live (*lebensunwertes Leben*).

But at a deeper level, a suspicion also grew in my mind that the surplus or newly created knowledge was finally anchored in the extortion of surplus or newly created value from the labouring people. To the extent that this is true, the novum is rendered ambiguous at the source, it is the spoils of war.

The lay of the land for the novum has changed from Baudelaire and Rimbaud to investment of billions, to science and technology as the racing bloodstream of corporate capitalism, where innovation is divorced from making our lives more pleasurable, beautiful, and easeful. Entire industries are based on “perpetually accelerating obsolescence,” most clearly computing (Wallis 2018: p. 82)<sup>1</sup>. Innovation has deliquesced into a stream of sensationalist effects largely put to the service of outdated and replacing existing commodities for faster circulation and profit. Novum’s “semantic impertinence” is in a great majority of cases abused for salesman touting, away from radically putting into doubt relationships of power and exploitation between groups of people (Ricoeur, 1976: p. 50).

Therefore, the plagues bothering us will not be dealt with by old antibiotics: progress, expanding GNP, onwards and upwards, reason identified with the bottom line. We are in between two major bifurcations: the “short twentieth century” ended about 1989; it had been thought that the other -- before the present pandemic and “coronisation” turn towards a surveillance society (Suvin, 2020: pp. 4-14) -- could be expected somewhere around 2040, give or take a decade, and barring an earlier nuclear war. I now think that the dubious decade is being resolved into our epoch’s end coming into sight right with 2020 and its prolonged aftermath, which even virologically will last at least 2-3 years. The old, including the old New, is dead, the new has not managed to see the light of the day, and we are not sure whether it will in our lifetimes (surely not in mine). In the meanwhile, a too long while, the old masquerades as the newest: as Gramsci and Brecht concluded, in the half-light monsters rise up. The incantatory use of the novum category as

---

<sup>1</sup> Compare also his ‘innovation’ in Wallis, *Red-Green Revolution*.

explanation rather than formulation of a problem has to be firmly rejected. Novum is as novum does: it does not supply justification, it demands justification.

Thus, if the Deluge is already upon us, is the proper position of a provisional survivor that if there's little dry land left – no guiding values – and if God and Communism are dead, then everything is permitted? Or is it rather, how many arks of what kind do we need, who could build them, how, and in which direction may the dove look for shores? Whence can salvation arise, from what collective human forces?

I conclude that *we need radically liberating novums only*. By “radically liberating” I mean not only a new quality as opposed to simple marketing difference: I mean a novelty that is also *in critical opposition to degrading relationships between people* as well as to the commodification of human and surrounding nature, and in fertile relation to memories of a humanised past. I mean further a novelty enabling us to understand whence comes the rising tide of racism and fascism 2.0, all fed by the central commandment of capitalism: profit now, more and more profit, and let the straggling hundreds of millions be thrown to wolves. A textbook example: Heinlein's super-racist united humanity of egalitarian super-militarists in *Starship Troopers* (1959), with genocidal discrimination transferred to non-humans – read: the dangerous classes or communists – and economics suppressed.

Further, perhaps a labour-saving and nature-saving eutopian society would also need novums, but just how many? Might we not rather wish, as William Morris did, for the true novum of “an epoch of rest”? Philosophically speaking, should we not take another look at the despised Aristotelian final cause? Politically speaking, what if science is a more and more powerful engine in the irrational system of cars and highways with capitalism in the driving seat heading for a crash with all of us unwilling passengers – what are then the novums in car power and design? How can we focus on anti-gravity, or at least rolling roads, or at the very least communally shared cars – which could have existed in 1918 if the patents had not been bought up and suppressed by the automotive industry, together with city trams and buses? How can we constitute a power system able to decide that there can be no freedom for suppressing people's freedom?

Last not least, any devoutly to be wished for eutopia would have to incorporate carefully chosen *Antiquums* (a term from Ernst Bloch, symmetrically obverse to his own Novum) or looks backward, best explained by Raymond Williams as working with the residual: “experiences, meanings, and values ... which may have an alternative or even oppositional relation to the

dominant culture” (Williams 1977: p. 122). Today such residual formations include the bourgeois democratic freedom of teaching, now sorely trampled from Istanbul’s well-known Boğaziçi University to US ones such as Florida University at Gainesville.

For, as in Brecht-Weill’s *Alabama Song*, if we don’t find a way out from the genocidal mastery that rules us, then “I tell you, I tell you, I tell you we must die” – prematurely, painfully, grotesquely. But then, as I concluded in “News from the Novum” (Suvin 2010a: 169-216)<sup>2</sup>, we need a new reasonableness: a rationality that incorporates much refurbished science but also permanent self-estrangement and self-criticism under the eyes of plebeian salvation, including practices not reducible to clear-cut concepts yet articulated in topological propositions – for example, those usually called emotions and approached in pioneering ways by some Feminist theoreticians<sup>3</sup>.

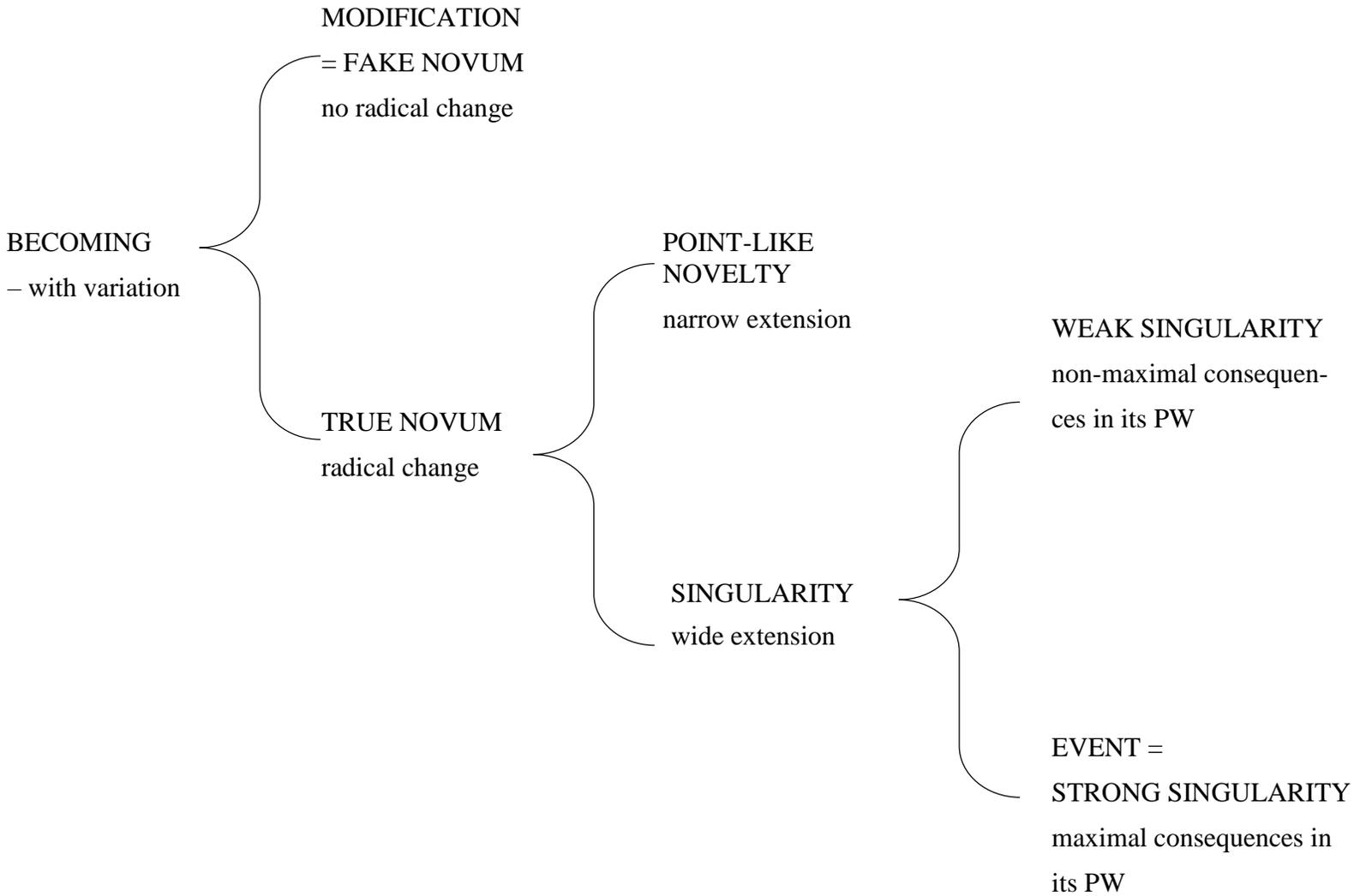
## 2. THE CASCADE SEQUENCE OF NOVUMS

2.1. Graph Stimulated by Badiou, *Logique des mondes*, without his ontology; TRUE NOVUM + POINT-LIKE NOVELTY as defined by Suvin in earlier writings; SINGULARITY and EVENT taken over from Badiou with thanks and anchored in Possible World theory.

---

<sup>2</sup> See also Tom Moylan (2001) “‘Look into the dark’: On Dystopia and the Novum,” in P. Parrinder ed., *Learning from Other Worlds*, pp. 51-71.

<sup>3</sup> My favourites are Nancy C.M. Hartsock (1983) *Money, Sex, and Power*; Alison M. Jaggar (1985) *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*; Alison M. Jaggar (1989) “Love and Knowledge,” in eadem and Susan Bordo eds., *Gender/ Body/ Knowledge*, pp. 145-71



2.2. Discussion of the Graph (with examples)

--FAKE NOVUM. Easy: more powerful and faster machines to kill and maim people – as all military technology – or to destroy nature; all private cars even if they have AI. Or the capitalist

*Das Immerwiedergleiche*<sup>4</sup>, though always with glitzy surface variations simulating novelty – such as chrome tailfins on cars in the 1950s or NGOs pushing civil society in Eastern Europe of the 1990s.

--TRUE NOVUM. Collective means of transport with minimum possible destruction of nature: armies without weapons to destroy people and nature but intervening usefully into relationships between people and with nature, as explained by Charles Fourier and Fredric Jameson<sup>5</sup>.

--POINT-LIKE NOVELTY. Truly useful but only for a relatively limited purpose – find your own examples.

--WEAK SINGULARITY. A true and widely applicable novum but with limited consequences for its Possible World concerning only some sectors, trades or groups – say, nylon. This is probably connected with compromise formations, such as Obama’s initial healthcare proposals (anyway torpedoed because pointing to a True Novum).

--STRONG SINGULARITY, Badiou’s EVENT. All true novums as inventions significantly benefitting potentially everybody and/ or the human habitat as a whole – or at least a strategically large and growing part of either – and having no major negative consequences: say, invention of printing or of vaccines.

Two mega-events belong here: first, the invention of *human solidarity for all working people*, as suggested early on by rabbi Yehoshuah’s solidarity within his communism of love and then by the French and Bolshevik revolutions (but soon squelched in their aftermath); and to ensure it, the institutionalization of Power going from such people below towards the momentary government in all plebeian revolutions, called *Soviets* in Russian, *Räte* in German, and I’m not sure what by the EZLN in Chiapas. Second, *electricity*, popularly also rightly called *light*: without light, no Enlightenment. The two were fused in Lenin’s formula for introducing communism to backward 1920s’ Russia: “Soviet Power and Electrification of the whole country” (Suvin 2017: p.

---

<sup>4</sup> I take my meaning of the term *Das Immerwiedergleiche* from Benjamin: see, for example, “das Immerwiedergleiche erscheint sinnfällig in der Massenproduktion zum ersten Mal” [‘the always-the-same first manifests itself in an obvious manner in the age of mass production’], Walter Benjamin (1982), *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 1, p. 680.

<sup>5</sup> See for Fourier *Oeuvres complètes*, 1966ff., and a comment in Suvin *Metamorphoses*, pp. 140-41; and for Jameson, his *An American Utopia*, 2016.

19). For the mega-event of Communism in Marx's sense of the abolition of power based on the exploitation by classes of rulers over everybody else – that is to my mind the only possible emergence from our Deluge -- we'd today have to add, say, three more factors to Lenin's.

### 3. *ON TOWARD GENERALISATION*

A meta-principle emerging from the above discussions, to be applied to all dystopias and dystopianism – and indeed, to all SF and utopia/nism -- is the splitting (dichotomy) of key notions, insisting on a polarity between what has value for a better life and what has not, a variant of which is the cascade model attempted in my Graph. Centrally, Social Darwinism has no such value. As suggested at the end of Section 1, the exclusive reliance on “ideas” (concepts) should be complemented with a topological approach to the role of sensual emotions, inferrable within and outside fiction, in order to approach satisfactory cognition (Suvin 1984). Already Nietzsche had surmised that we have to “look at science in the light of art, but at art in the light of life” (19).

Historically, early 20th-century dystopias were a defensive weapon of the Welfare State against Fascism and similar involutions of democratic States. The menace was fairly clear and the response a coherent subgenre. After 1968, the “critical” utopias and dystopias added a New Left critique of the Old Left and its absolutist methods. In our present global arrival of semi- or three-quarter Fascism, much helped by the surveillance State enthroned during this pandemic, the menace is upon us, capillary and multiform; such is, it seems to me, also the present spread of what we should by now call an organised antio-utopia.

#### *Works Cited*

I list here first my works (chronologically), in which the arguments treated here were developed at length and where large bibliographies may be found, and then the other works cited (alphabetically).

Suvin, D. (1979/2016) *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. Yale UP; augmented edn. Ed. Gerry Canavan, P. Lang.

- (1994) "On Cognitive Emotions and Topological Imagination." *Versus* no. 68-69: 165-201.
- (2005) "Of Starship Troopers and Refuseniks: War and Militarism in US Science Fiction," rpt. in idem, *Disputing the Deluge: 21st Century Writings on Utopia, Narration, Horizons of Survival*. Ed. Hugh O'Connell. Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, 127-58.
- (2010a) *Defined by a Hollow: Essays on Utopia, Science Fiction, and Political Epistemology*. P. Lang.
- (2010b) "On the Horizons of Epistemology and Science." *Critical Quarterly* 52.1: 68-101.
- (2017) *Lessons from the Russian Revolution and Its Fallout: An Epistemological Approach*. Rosa Luxemburg Foundation Southeast Europe. [www.rosalux.rs/en/lessons-russian-revolution-and-its-fallout](http://www.rosalux.rs/en/lessons-russian-revolution-and-its-fallout)
- (2020) "How To Go On: Political Epistemology for Pandemy Times." *Socialism & Democracy* no. 83 [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08854300.2020.1821338?src=](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08854300.2020.1821338?src=)

## 2. By Other Authors

- Badiou, Alain. (2006) *Logiques des mondes. L'Être et l'Événement*, 2. Seuil.
- Benjamin, W. (1982) *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7 vols. R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser eds. Suhrkamp.
- Bloch, Ernst. (1959) *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 2 vols. Suhrkamp.
- Eco, Umberto. (1986) "Dictionary vs. Encyclopedia," in Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*. Indiana UP.
- Fourier, Charles. (1966ff) *Oeuvres Complètes*. Anthropos.
- Hartsock, Nancy C.M. (1983) *Money, Sex, and Power*. Longman.
- Jaggar, Alison M. (1985) *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- (1989) "Love and Knowledge," in eadem and S. Bordo eds., *Gender/Body/Knowledge*. Rutgers UP.
- Jameson, Fredric. (2016) *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*, Verso.
- Moylan, Tom. (2001) "'Look into the dark': On Dystopia and the Novum," in P. Parrinder ed., *Learning from Other Worlds*. Duke U.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. (1967) *Birth of Tragedy*. Transl. W. Kaufmann. Vintage.
- Ricoeur, Paul. (1976) *Interpretation Theory*. Texas Christian UP.
- Wallis, Victor. (2008) "Innovation." *Historical Materialism* 16.3: 227-32.
- (2018) *Red-Green Revolution: The Politics and Technology of Ecosocialism*. Political Animal.
- Williams, Raymond. (1977) *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford UP.