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## READING REALITY THROUGH SCIENCE FICTION

### Abstract

Big questions over the future of humankind have traditionally given legitimacy to popular stories about science and technology. Science fiction has long been credited with the ability to anticipate how audiences are prone to interpret the promises of technological progress. The genre of science fiction and its relevance to popular culture can also be construed as an excellent tool for reading the challenges of the present. Under capitalism and socialism, the complex uses of science fiction raised big moral and political questions, while challenging notions of literary style and visual aesthetics. Two trends have long been prevalent in science fiction: the first, that of totalitarian dystopia, started with classic literature. Off and on-screen, dystopian stories reveal a Panopticon society, where the pervasiveness of technology removes any hope of individual life. The second trend is that of climate fiction: narratives that imagine a world dramatically changed by the climate breakdown show that our society can always be brought back to a pre-modern state by resource scarcity and overpopulation. Ever more, totalitarian dystopia and climate fiction prove that their readers are of particular interest nowadays: they have the onerous task of trying to make sense of a growing body of literature that now points to the difficulty of telling apart reality from simulation. Ultimately, science fiction helps audiences look into the way we like to think that humankind is facing an increasingly technological present; it does so by framing this moment in time as having been shaped by a possible future.

Key words: Science Fiction, SF genre, *Science Fiction Studies*

William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), one of the most famous works in contemporary science fiction literature, begins with these famous words: "The sky above the port was the color of a television, tuned to a dead channel". In retrospect, they are more than the manifesto-haiku of a genre, the cyberpunk. Bound to colonize the computer imaginary born in the 1980s, this sentence is possibly the most popular meaning of science fiction: an attitude toward (as well as a reflection of) the world readers are living in. If the science fiction sky of the 1930s or 1940s, the so-called 'golden age', was studded with stars foreshadowing our presumed interstellar destiny, in the 1980s, the same sky turned grey like a broken television set. As such, it was the embodiment of an unfulfilled technological promise. This is an obviously pessimistic narrative, a far cry from the carefree techno-utopianism of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century science fiction. By reworking the great break represented by James Ballard's New Wave – and its reference to inner space as a new field of exploration –, science fiction (SF) has finally transformed inner space into cyberspace.

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Much like the genre per se, the study of science fiction has a long history. For all intents and purposes, reading stories set in the future in order to reveal cultural and social understandings does justice to the many traditions of SF. Notions of renewal and change are inextricably linked with studying science fiction narratives (on and off screen). The history of *Science Fiction Studies* (<https://www.depauw.edu/sfs/index.htm>), a journal started in 1973, is revealing of the “genre as a historical process” (Rieder, 2010: 192) too. It makes abundantly clear “the greater generic heterogeneity within sf generally (fiction, film, TV, and other media, such as video games and advertising and design)” (Aldiss et al, 2006: 398). Far from being representative of everything happening in science fiction studies, this issue of *Messages Sages and Ages* (MSA) gives yet another insight into what reading SF seems to have always been: a challenge to methodological presuppositions. For the most part, they go hand in hand with competing versions of history cast in the dystopian scenario of the future. However, fruitful attempts have been made lately “to uncover the foci, themes, and findings of research literature that utilized science fiction content or concepts to describe and illustrate human culture” (Menadue & Cheer, 2017: 1). Our call for papers, which asked for contributions looking at the intersections of reality and science fiction, rendered self-evident the heterogeneous nature of strikingly dissimilar approaches to the genre.

This issue of MSA hosts several contributions that go in a double direction: on the one hand, they show how science fiction has contributed to shaping our current reality. For example, they are drawing the connection between the cyberpunk movement and the birth of hackers. Posthuman science fiction and the current attempts of transhumanism to defeat death by uploading our consciousness on hard drives are mentioned as well. On the other hand, most of the contributors show how science fiction is a tool for understanding where we are going, envisioning the coming impact of technological acceleration on society. There is really no getting around the cliché that science fiction is the literature that best captures the spirit of the time. Specifically, of *this* out-of-joint time where past, present and future coexist in reading reality with the help of science fiction. Once again, the genre can also be construed as an excellent tool for reading the present age and the way we are imagining the future. As a matter of fact, inquiries into social questions have traditionally given popular legitimacy to stories about science and technology. The complex uses of SF under capitalism and socialism raised big moral and political questions, while challenging notions of literary style and visual aesthetics. The questions we have tried to answer ourselves deal with its effectiveness in conveying the kind of analytical potential (Freedman, 2000) that legitimates growing academic interest in the genre.

Scholarship on SF commonly reads primary sources through the lens of other literary genres and critical approaches: science fiction narratives help foster debate on various issues, ranging from environmental justice to gender wars. At least to some extent, we have tried to address a long standing concern over the state of the field from somewhat different angles and perspectives than those of what has long been termed “English-language SF” (Levin & Prizel, 1977). Our contributors reflect on their experience of reading/watching mainstream English-language stories on the future mostly from the perspective of continental Europe. The field of SF research brings together scientifically-informed approaches taken in response to challenges regarding the so-called marginal nature of fictional narratives about real and perceived science. One way or another, the landscape of SF studies has to come to terms with gloomy narratives about the world we are living in. Since the 1980s, the space dream has been interrupted; at the same time, megalopolises suffer more and more from pollution, congestion and growing economic inequalities; the world is living under the threat of nuclear extinction and/or impending post-apocalypse. The post-atomic future, possibly even worse than mass extermination, is always around the corner. Ozone holes and global warming anticipate the great anxiety of irreversible climate change. In this context, the expectations engendered by the nature of contemporary science fiction are particularly disheartening. Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic literature, already emerging in the 1950s, have now spilled over into public attitudes and narratives to become almost all-encompassing. Two science fiction trends have long been prevalent: the first, that of totalitarian dystopia, started with classic literature – 1984, *Brave New World* and *Fahrenheit 451*. Today, the dystopian imagery embeds the public into the shared history of the Panopticon society where the pervasiveness of technological and digital control systems removes any hope of individual life. The second trend is that of climate fiction. Most of these narratives imagine a world transformed by the climate breakdown, where our society can always be brought back to a pre-modern state by resource scarcity and overpopulation. Cyril M. Kornbluth and Frederik Pohl’s *The Space Merchants* (1952)

paved the way to understanding how we are likely to make the same mistakes no matter where we live in the galaxy.

If one is to consider the famous example of the unbelievable similarities between Jules Verne's trip to the Moon and the Apollo 11 mission, we realize once again why readers are led to assume that SF masterpieces can foresee the future. Nevertheless, this does not seem to be always the case. Rather, the genre helps audiences look into the way we like to think humankind is going to face the future. Ultimately, it does so by framing this moment in time as having been shaped by a possible future. In an interview with *Wired*, William Gibson himself hinted that guesswork about the technologically-advanced future is the least of his concerns:

I think the least important thing about science fiction for me is its predictive capacity. Its record for being accurately predictive is really, really poor! If you look at the whole history of science fiction, what people have said is going to happen, what writers have said is going to happen, and what actually happened – it's terrible. We're almost always wrong. Our reputation for being right relies on some human capacity to marvel at the times when, yay, you got it right! Arthur Clarke predicted communications satellites and things like that. Those are marvelous – it's great when someone gets it right, but almost always it's wrong. (Gibson, 2012)

Certainly, insights that science fiction writers put forth in their books may be right. Some of the most striking examples are the development of the cyberspace and the current problem of technological unemployment (foreshadowed in Isaac Asimov's robot series). Some science fiction inventions may be inspirational to those who help turn them into real-life products and services – for instance, Arthur Clarke's geostationary satellites. Nonetheless, the relationship between SF and the future is different from that of mere foresight. Although SF imaginings can change our lives for the better (from true artificial intelligence to teleportation), most of them are still far beyond our actual capabilities. More likely, the great achievement of SF has been its ability to anticipate how audiences are prone to interpret the promises of technological progress. Its appeal lies in the possibility of foreshadowing the long-term consequences of technological knowledge and social developments (rather than in being 'accurately predictive'). Even if atomic war did not wipe out humankind, the use value of (apocalyptic) science fiction is self-evident for most. To all extents and purposes, SF is not the story of what is to come (while the scenarios of the nuclear strategists of Norad or Rand Corporation are essentially forecasts based on factual knowledge). The many stories of impending doom provide audiences with credible representations of future worlds. In this sense, the fact that contemporary science fiction is struggling with the problems of climate change, technological unemployment, artificial super-intelligence, radical longevity and immortality is quite meaningful. Such concerns stand for the famous commitment of science fiction "as an epistemology or attitude toward the world" (Aldiss et al, 2006: 398). This proves the genre's enduring ability to look forward and come up with legitimate narratives about our self-image.

Although some have blamed the excessive production of dystopias in contemporary fiction (Solana, 2014), the fact that this particular sub-genre is gaining traction is as much a thing of the present as it was in the past. The above-mentioned example of dystopian literature's classics shows that dystopian writing has always gone hand in hand with the development of speculative fiction. But then again, "sci-fi is often best when it's subversive" (Merchant, 2014). As a matter of fact, science fiction serves to question the present. It cannot possibly be reduced to the story of a world where technological solutionism will have solved all our problems and people live as if they were characters in Bacon's New Atlantis. Does this mean that there is no more room for utopianism in science fiction? Absolutely not. Although the era of utopian literature passed long ago, utopia is definitely here to stay, even when it seems to be dealing exclusively with distressing scenarios. Actually, many of these works can be defined as "critical dystopias", the peculiarity of which consisting in negotiating

the necessary pessimism of the generic dystopia with an open, militant, utopian stance that not only breaks through the hegemonic enclosure of the text's alternative world but also self-reflexively refuses the anti-utopian temptation that lingers like a dormant virus in every dystopian account. (Moylan, 2000)

Science fiction audiences must therefore be able to find a way out of the dystopian scenario, preferably as soon as possible. In order to prevent the worst-case scenario from taking place, the public is offered timely challenges for action. As the business-as-usual model of the Anthropocene seems destined to end badly, questioning the present state of things comes with the territory of SF more than ever before. Today, science fiction is therefore much more ‘militant’, to the point where the idea of impending doom is no longer food for thought but an overarching truth of popular culture. There is no doubt that 21<sup>st</sup>-century SF is much more critical of the status quo than the science fiction of the golden age, which was, at least to some extent, an expression of the same ‘Yankee ingenuity’ that led both to the Manhattan and the Apollo Projects.

At the same time, the shifts and breaks in the long “history of science fiction” (Roberts, 2006) have become more apparent as technology makes it impossible for us to know if what we are hearing and seeing is real or fake. This is also revealing of the newest developments in SF, which sometimes coincide with headlines hailing its death. Most of us witnessed the end of science fiction throughout postmodernism. For that matter, there was also a time when we were in awe over our experience with the imaginary of utopia. Jean Baudrillard distinguished between three orders of simulacra, each capable of generating a particular type of imaginary: *natural simulacra* (the utopian imaginaries), *productionist simulacra* “based on energy and force, materialized by the machine and the entire system of product”, and *simulation simulacra*, “based on information, the model, cybernetic play” (1991: 309). Baudrillard wondered what kind of imagery these simulacra could produce, since they are, in turn, simulated simulations (e.g., *Neuromancer* or *Snow Crash*, based on the concept of cyberspace, that is the virtual simulation of a physical space). He deduced from this

that the “good old” SF imagination is dead, and that something else is beginning to emerge (and not only in fiction, but also in theory). Both traditional SF and theory are destined to the same fate: flux and imprecision are putting an end to them as specific genres. (Baudrillard, 1991: 309)

It was a good insight, while somewhat excessive. Science fiction is far from dead: actually, it has assumed such a pervasive role in the popular imagination as to become indistinguishable from reality itself. In this sense, Baudrillard has certainly been farsighted: with his theory of hyperreality, he anticipated the modern problems of the post-truth society, exacerbated by technological acceleration, artificial intelligence and its ability to generate fake reality (in a very similar way to what Philip K. Dick envisaged in his novels). We could go so far as to argue that science fiction today is no longer just a tool for reading the present: it generates the present we live in. This makes science fiction authors even more important than they were in the golden age. Currently, the American and French Departments of Defense are recruiting science fiction authors who, for the most part, are asked to offer their expertise to the military sector (Prosser, 2019). This is showing again how defense politics is inflected with SF imagination, much like during the Second World War. At the time, Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein and L. Sprague de Camp were hired by the US Navy to work on a secret military project (Dedman, 2016: 47).

Science fiction writers are welcome to think highly of themselves. Moreover, their readers are becoming particularly valuable to society themselves: they have a depth of knowledge about what is real and what is not. For example, they can help us understand how reality has become distorted by social media and fake news. Conclusively, their job is to prevent Dick’s vision of commodified human experiences from coming true:

Fake realities will create fake humans. Or, fake humans will generate fake realities and then sell them to other humans, turning them, eventually, into forgeries of themselves. So we wind up with fake humans inventing fake realities and then peddling them to other fake humans. (Dick, 1995: 259)

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