Imagining and Reimagining the Future

Commentary

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One definition of science fiction is that it is a literature of cognitive estrangement (Suvin, 1988). It is cognitive, meaning it describes worlds that make sense, that can be reasoned about. It is estranged in that it is, nevertheless. not this world but some other. It is a view of science fiction—and sometimes also of utopian writing—that is about its critical difference from the world. Science fiction is a literary construction that allows one to grasp the actual world through another one. This approach highlights the literary aspect of the genre.

I think it's quite possible to approach science fiction and even utopian writing entirely the other way around, to see it not in its difference from the world but rather in its radical attention to verisimilitude. Maybe there's no estrangement at all. It is just a little intoxicating to read because of its extremist commitment to describing what actually is, to the point of distorting or fabricating all *inessential* details. In this sense, it is hypernaturalism in relation to the routine bourgeois novel, which gets the naturalistic details right, but evades direct address to the core relation or situation.

And so while it is perhaps a little teleological, I think it is useful to treat science fiction as offering what Brooks and Sinnreich call *futuretypes*. These, they say, "embody a vision of how an invention fits into an imagined future," but "they may also encompass new forms of community, new civic institutions, and new approaches to organizational communication" (this Special Section). In the terms I am starting with, futuretypes as forms function not in their difference from our hegemonic common-sense assumptions but rather in their extreme fidelity to them, pushing them to expose exploitation and liberation as content.

In this sense, at its best, science fiction does not function as ideology critique. It is not a negation (successful or unsuccessful) of a dominant ideological form. It is rather what the situationists called a *détournement* of them (Wark, 2015)—that is to say, a sort of illegitimate and unlicensed variation and reproduction on some commonplace figure or narrative component. At best, it works affirmatively rather than negatively. Good science fiction is not a critique of ideology, it's a *better* ideology. It is a futuretype to try out as a component myth or feeling about a better life.

The texts collected here work through some of the futuretypes most commonly found in science fiction: the individual versus the collective, alien encounters, end of material scarcity, black holes, life extension and posthumans, new genders and "races," and the generation starship. I'll make some brief comments on each of these futuretypes, then gesture toward a few more one might consider.

Selves and Others

Sinnreich rightly considers the individual versus the collective to be a futuretype caught up in the cold war. The bad guys are too collectivist and have to be resisted as a threat to individuality. *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Kaufman, 1978) would be the classic text. Fear of collectivism is key to the Borg in *Star Trek*, who come across as the universe's most successful Stalinists. This picture is complicated a bit, I think, by *Starship Troopers* (Verhoven, 1997), in which defending "our way of life" tends in itself to produce a kind of fascist collectivism.

A nice point of comparison might be *The Year 200,* by the Cuban science fiction writer Agustín de Rojas (2016), in which the collectivist futuretype is the one trying to defend itself from agents of capitalist imperialism who have preserved themselves from the past to attack a future communist society. It belongs to a long and august tradition of communist science fiction, perhaps dating from Alexander Bogdanov's (1984). *Red Star*. There, an older and more "mature" Martian communist civilization offers a model of collective and postgender life that our merely human hero cannot quite live up to. The collective futuretype can offer, as Lingel says, "moments of uncanniness stem from encounters with hybridity" (this Special Section). This is certainly the case in the *Lilith's Brood* books by Octavia Butler (2000).

This brings us to the alien futuretype. Litchfield stresses the ways in which aliens posit the question of communication, for example, in China Miéville's (2012) *Embassytown*, in which alien speech is premised on duality rather than individuality; or in Butler again, in which the aliens can accumulate and communicate genetic material; or in Lem's (2002) *Solaris*, in which communication is really not possible at all. In a more comic vein, Tim Burton's (1996) *Mars Attacks* has the hapless humans trying repeatedly to make peace with aliens that just want to kill them. One might wonder how the problem of communication with the alien might function as an allegory for the writer's problem of communicating with readerships.

The alien futuretype immediately brings up the question of race. There is no shortage of science fiction that gleefully celebrates violence against a racialized *Other*. *Starship Troopers* attempted a critical take on this, but did not succeed. In *Alien* (Scott, 1979) and its successors, the alien is not recognizable as equivalent to the human, but may very well be a stand-in for the feminine as some sort of slimy, enveloping reproductive nightmare.

Then again, there are interestingly nonracial versions of the alien, such as the Cylons in the *Battlestar Galactica* remake (Larson & Moore, 2004–2009), whose difference cuts across race and gender lines. But surely the best treatment of this theme is in the work of Octavia Butler, who plays in complicated ways with our sympathies for the alien, the human, and the hybrid beings of her fiction. And let's not forget Wells's classic *Time Machine*, in which a class difference becomes racialized—and doesn't that look prophetic in 21st century America?

On a more optimistic note, the award-winning novella *Binti,* by Nnedi Okorafor (2016), makes the Black indigenous human character the peacemaker, able to negotiate the difference with the alien through her own alienation within the human. Adams asks, "Does science fiction reify more than subvert?" (this

Special Section). In the case of *Binti*, it is both, in that it makes racial difference a positive, but yet it takes race as given in its otherwise futuristic universe.

In Naomi Mitchison's (1962) *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*, the central character empathizes with aliens to the point of thinking and feeling like them, both when their cognitive universe seems to her an admirable one and when it does not. For Mitchison, such empathetic merging with the alien is socialism. Peter Watts (2008) thinks in a far more relentlessly Darwinian way about the alien encounter, but tries to give the alien a plausible *xenobiology*, itself a particular kind of respect for the Other.

Sexes and Genders

Pluretti brings us to the world of feminist utopias and science fiction, which might include Naomi Mitchison, Marge Piercy, and Joanna Russ as well as Ursula Le Guin. Samuel Delany's (1996) *Trouble on Triton* is a pioneering text about gender change. In Kim Stanley Robinson's *2312,* there are multiple posthuman genders. I think the most curious work here is by Charles Stross. I'm thinking of *Accelerando* (2006) and, in particular, *The Glass House* (2007). In those posthuman worlds, where subjectivities can be downloaded into different bodies, there are characters who become other genders. Stross seems to have some anxieties about this, or perhaps to anticipate them on behalf of straight male readers, and so the books narrowly miss being mainstream queer science fiction classics.

Sinnreich mentions Constance Penley's (1997) now classic study of fan fiction as a space for gender play. One might also mention a nonmainstream work like Pat Califia's (1990) *Doc and Fluff*, which is lesbian S&M porn set in a future dystopian America. But still, even very mainstream science fiction occasionally gestures to queerness. We actually get to see sex with a nonhuman alien for a few seconds in *Galaxy Quest*. And there is an episode of *Star Trek Voyager* in which the doctor takes over the body of Seven of Nine and has sex with a man. These narratives do not stray too far from heteronormative assumptions, but futuretypes such as downloadable subjectivities or aliens make a certain wiggle room about sexuality presentable, even in mass market contexts.

Besides the encounter with the alien Other, there is the theme of the human itself becoming Other. In an astonishing episode of *Star Trek Voyager*, both the pilot Tom Paris and Captain Janeway experience accelerated human evolution. Both end up as smooth, slippery, amphibious, four-legged creatures whose litter of infants is seen slithering into a pool of water. When Tom and the captain return to their human selves, it is agreed between them that this will never be spoken of ever again.

That the characters return to "normal" is key in that variation on the posthuman futuretype. There is a lot of anxiety about the boundaries of the human. As Adams notes, it is technology that is often taken as the bad agent, as in the *Matrix* or *Terminator* movies. But as Donna Haraway (2016) pointed out a long time ago, *Blade Runner* is a bit different. There's room in that version to accept some version of a cyborg being. And of course although the Borg are supposed to be the bad guys in *Star Trek* narratives, as an image, they are often appropriated into fan art as a kind of sexy posthuman avatar. For Kim Stanley Robinson and Charles Stross, the posthuman body is a celebrated object: sexy, pangendered, long lasting, but not free from complicated issues of class, power, and—in Stross, in particular—debt. In *Elysium*

(Blomkamp, 2013) and Michael Winterbottom's (2013) *Code 46*, there is rather more attention to exclusion and class where the posthuman is concerned.

Rottinghaus mentions the example of *Ex Machina*, and it has to be said that when the futuretype of the posthuman is crossed with that of gender in popular narratives, we often end up with potentially more conservative or anxious kinds of material. Mamoru Oshii's (2004) *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* might be a rather more sophisticated presentation of the same futuretype. One could read *Ex Machina* quite optimistically, in that the posthuman woman kills her misogynist creator and also has no use for the "nice" boy who is supposed to train her. Oshii's film is rather darker and wants to ask who would be sacrificed to the creation of the posthuman.

To Have and Have Not

As Rottinghaus notes, a future of plenty and nonscarcity is rare. Many landscapes of science fiction are blasted and desolate, and posthuman characters are not always privileged ones, going back perhaps to William Gibson's (2016) *Neuromancer*, which Fredric Jameson (2007) identified as a classic allegory of late capitalism. Perhaps this is just how it appears in the West, where the tradition of communist science fiction begun by Bogdanov is rarely seen. One might mention Constant Nieuwenhuys's *New Babylon*, a multimedia artwork meant to visually invoke an entire planetary civilization of postscarcity (Wark, 2015).

Still, it is hard not to see the replicators of *Star Trek* as a kind of socialist mode of production. Access to resources is rationed, as in the communist science fiction of Agustín de Rojas, but because resources are plentiful, the rations are hardly punitive. One might ask what becomes of aesthetics in an age of plenty. I think the best answer to this was given by Oscar Wilde (2001), if we can annex his *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* to the genre of science fiction. There, the socialization of the means of production is the very thing that enables a flowering of individualism as the production of everyday life itself as a work of art. Certainly its better than the horrible knick-knacks Star Fleet officers pull out of the replicator and call "art."

A running joke in the *Star Trek* parody *Galaxy Quest* is that the crew member who is not an officer is going to get killed along the way. Space, it seems, is for a kind of managerial class only. The futuretype of the generational ship raises questions of class and distribution. Actually, I think it is a broader type that has to do with closed worlds. The movie *Snowpiercer* would be a good example, as would the extraordinary self-published novel by Hugh Howey, *Wool*. We're not good at thinking of closed worlds, as if the Earth will never run out of places to dump our chaotic mess. Kim Stanley Robinson's *Aurora* is a very fine instance, with its moving picture of a closed system slowly running down. It is a bracing corrective to a certain endless optimism, not just about space travel but also about living in closed systems in general.

I find the futuretypes approach fruitful and one that can be extended to cover a lot of additional examples. However, sometimes one has to resist seeing only the merely human in science fiction. A clear example is the black hole. For Lingel, the black hole orients the reader's confrontation with Otherness and

multiplicity. For Sutko, it is a way to exoticize a permanently unknowable Other. For Sinnreich, in a Freudian vein, it is the vagina. All are quite possibly the case. But I think science fiction really does sometimes open onto a sublime and utterly nonhuman universe, and—even if only for an instant—we can think of it in itself, without us. This would be the difference between what Quentin Meillassoux (2015) calls science fiction and *extro*-science fiction. It flickers briefly into existence in, for example, the work of Liu Cixin.

Futures and Futuretypes

One could add some futuretypes. Philip K. Dick (2012) gives us the consensual hallucination, for example, in the *Game Players of Titan*. This is the origin of a lot of cinematic science fiction along the lines of *The Matrix* or *eXistenZ*. The author J. G. Ballard gives us what can only be called the Ballardian, which is sometimes a kind of reverse science fiction: Perfectly ordinary situations are described *as if* they were science fiction. Then there is very long duration, for example, first used by J. B. S. Haldane (2001) and raised to a fine art in Olaf Stapledon's (1999) *Last and First Men* and more recently in Liu Cixin's (2016) *Death's End.* This might be of significance in the Anthropocene, as we try to think about geological rather than merely historical time frames.

I think it is also worth considering games and whether there is anything distinctive about how futuretypes might work in games as a medium. Both Alex Galloway (2006) and myself (Wark, 2007) have argued, along similar lines, that they might. Games might be a kind of perfected neoliberal utopian futuretype, one with connections to textual and cinematic science fiction, such as *Ender's Game* (Card, 1994)*.*

There's not much in these texts about the futuretypes of dystopia and apocalypse, which would be a study in themselves. I think a subtly different futuretype is at work now, particularly in cinema, which elsewhere I have called the "Anthropo{mise-en-s}cène" (Wark, 2014). Here the *mise-en-scène* is more or less science fiction, but the work is an allegory for Anthropocene anxieties. Such films might include *Snowpiercer*, *Gravity*, *The Martian*, and *Mad Max: Fury Road*. In text form, William Gibson's (2015) *The Peripheral*, with its novel disjunctive temporal structure, participates in the same structure of feeling.

In this futuretype, anything *but* the actual concerns of the Anthropocene, such as climate change, ocean acidification, mass extinction, and so forth, can be the premise of a story about survival and recovery amid malfunctioning technical systems. In contrast, there is a modest genre now called *cli-fi*, for climate fiction, that explicitly tries to think through the affective and practical problems of an unstable climate. James Bradley's (2015) *Clade* is a particularly fine example.

Finally, the futuretypes of science fiction are about media in at least a double sense. One sense is that science fiction sometimes imagines media. William Gibson and Neal Stephenson have been particularly influential, not so much in imagining what media devices will be like but rather what our structure of feeling about media will be like and what kinds of aggregate effects *mediation* will have on the world. Charles Stross, in particular, has brought questions of finance into science fiction as questions of mediation, and that seems strikingly effective to me as a futuretype.

In another sense, science fiction is itself a form of mediation that functions as a form of reproducing standard ideological tropes but also of inventing new ones. Both as literary and cinematic language, and now also game language, science fiction creates a vector along which popular audiences can participate in thinking and feeling about their lives. As recent award-season controversies have shown, there is still a readership that thinks of science fiction as allegories for colonial adventure. But it turns out there is also a large and articulate popular readership that wants futuretypes of a quite different kind. That in itself is a small reason to imagine there could actually be a future.

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