

Science Fiction

September 12. Attempts at definition.

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Office hours: 3:00–5:00, Murray 031

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Last time

- I. Conditions of emergence: modernization
 - a. Redistribution of literacy and education
 - b. Widespread, low-cost print media
 - c. Realignment of generic system in fiction
 - d. Increasing cultural authority of science
 - e. Increasing diffusion/importance of technical skills
 - f. Intensification of industrial production
(long twentieth century of the world-system)

Last time

2. Estrangement (fisherwoman principle)
 - a. reversing polarities
 - b. take the million-mile perspective
 - c. identification...reveals difference
(what is the negation of patriarchy?)
 - d. difference...reveals identity (species-being...?)
3. Utopia
 - a. *Things could be otherwise.*
 - b. Can it be represented?
 - c. How will it come about?
 - d. Who will run the show?

Genre

“a set of conventional and highly organised constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning”

(John Frow, *Genre*, 10)

themes

forms

rhetorical aims/effects

situations of address

background knowledges

physical medium

Genre

“a set of conventional and highly organised constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning”

(John Frow, *Genre*, 10)

themes

forms

rhetorical aims/effects

Gernsback

thematic
formal
rhetorical

Is “scientifiction” science fiction as you know it?

(more next time on *Amazing Stories*)

formal

SF is, then[,] a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment.

Suvin, "Poetics," 375

SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional "novum" (novelty, innovation) **validated** by cognitive logic.

Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979)

what isn't it?

Discuss: What is the *opposite* of science fiction?
(you can also think about Suvin's opinions...)

what isn't it?

Even less congenial to SF is the *fantasy* (ghost, horror, Gothic, weird) tale, a genre committed to the interposition of anti-cognitive laws into the empirical environment...

Suvin, "Poetics," 376

what isn't it?

A misshapen subgenre...is that of “science-fantasy,” extending from Poe through Merritt to Bradbury...tales that incongruously mingle science-fictional and fantastic narrative...If SF exists at all, this is not it.

Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 68–69

what isn't it?

Two other structural characteristics of fantasy...contrast sharply with SF and can also serve as *differentiae specifica* for this genre, namely the organization of fantasy around the ethical binary of good and evil, and the fundamental role it assigns to magic.

The absence of any sense of history...most sharply differentiates fantasy from Science Fiction.

Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*
(London:Verso, 2005), 58, 61.

distinctions

Why do these writers make these negations?

distinctions

Note also that many Science Fiction fans dislike the term Sci-Fi: to them it suggests the flanderized conception of the genre in popular culture, with green-skinned aliens, giant space battles and hammy production values. Therefore, they will insist on calling it SF for short.

<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ScienceFiction>

“science”

The natural sciences caught up and surpassed the literary imagination in the 19th century, the sciences dealing with human relationships might be argued to have caught up with it in their highest theoretical achievements but have certainly not done so in their alienated social practice. In the 20th century, SF has moved into the sphere of anthropological and cosmological thought...

Once the elastic criteria of literary structuring have been met, *a cognitive—in most cases, strictly scientific—element becomes a measure of aesthetic quality.*

Suvin, 379, 381.

distinctions?

I am, by trade, a science-fiction writer. That is, the fiction I've written so far has arrived at the point of consumption via a marketing mechanism called "science fiction."

William Gibson, "Rocket Radio" (1989)

Blogging prompt

Group I

How does the medium of the pulp magazine matter? After looking through the assigned materials from the first *Amazing Stories*, comment on one aspect of the medium that shapes how you read. You will have to try to imagine holding the original flimsy, cheap paper product that you are seeing in digitized images.

(You might consider: what difference would it make to read the same texts in a glossy or “slick” magazine? Or in a bound book? Or on a smartphone?)

Essays forbidden: write a paragraph.