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A VISION OF MAN IN THE PRESENT AND THE
FUTURE AS SEEN IN SOME BRITISH AND
AMERICAN WORKS OF SCIENCE FICTION

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by

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INTRODUCTION

What do we mean by Science Fiction ? What does it do and why do so many people read it ? What are its characteristic values, attitudes and procedures ? Is it a creative force in our society, or is it just a passing symptom ? How much of it is worth the attention of the non-scientific reader ?

These questions are frequently asked as a result of Science Fiction's present status as a highly popular and fashionable art-form. They are not easy to answer because science fiction, varies from repetition of formulas on the one hand to the most profound imaginative achievements on the other. This thesis attempts to give a portrait of science fiction as a form of creative literature : that is, not as a disembodied group of notions and ideas about technological progress, for example, nor as a 'sub-literature' which may one day hope to aspire to literary status.

Though science fiction is now generally recognized as a literary form with its own history and tradition, its conventions and its major writers, critical declarations about it are extremely unreliable. Sometimes we find certain works overpraised, reflecting of course, the opportunism of the publishers and perhaps a certain defensive attitude amongst the fans of this genre. A writer

may comment on another author's book as 'the world's best living science-fiction writer' when all that this author has written is just one single story, the same author who put this in a paperback introduction to his friend's stories has himself "created an epic of nearly classic proportions" according to the publisher's opinion. This does not exclude the fact that science fiction already possesses its great literary figures. But the critical atmosphere does not make it easy for the ordinary reader to discover who they are.

With that in mind, it is my belief that to lay down a final value-judgement is not possible in a field as dynamic as science fiction. This thesis does not aim at an 'exhaustive coverage' of the literary field of science fiction, despite the fact that its contents are arranged in a chronological order. It has attempted to establish the common properties of science fiction by treating themes in science fiction novels of a certain period in English literature. It tries to portray science fiction as a coherent system and not as individual voices springing up here and there, every now and then.

Science fiction, considered as a genre or way of writing, belongs to a much larger system : it is a phenomenon of modern culture, depicting the human condition with all

its problems whether material or mental.

In order to understand its growth, it is important to look at it as a vision---a coherent way of perceiving man and the universe, it is a world view which identified it and set it apart from other literary forms.

The first chapter is an attempt to define science fiction and relate it to the Western literary tradition. My purpose has been mainly to show that science fiction as a popular literature is not inferior to other kinds of literature, but that it functions as the means by which a culture explores and creates its own values.

The second chapter shows that science fiction has its roots and history, and it is common for books and essays on science fiction to trace it back to Lucian, Thomas More, Francis Bacon, Cyrano de Bergerac and so on, just to add a dimension of respectability to the new movement. It is doubtful that these ancient literary figures had an influence on each other, let alone on science fiction as it has developed in the last half of the century.

Chapter three deals with the first true classical figure of science fiction, H. G. Wells. His works have set a new mood and the themes that he used influenced

many writers after him as C. S. Lewis. Through analysing the works of these writers, we see that science fiction is more than just the theme of interplanetary travel, and that space travel is just a background to provide authenticity. In this chapter, I have specifically traced the anti-utopian theme, showing Wells's influence and how it is from him that writers of anti-utopias learned to use this form. In some cases also the anti-utopian theme was a reaction against the Wellsian imagination.

In Chapter Four, I have dealt with another important theme related to the anti-utopian theme. The apocalypse means different things to different writers : for Wells and Wyndham the idea of alien invasion shows an inner fear from the unknown, but for Clarke, the apocalypse is seen as a metaphor of philosophical or transcendental transformation, and not in literal terms. J. G. Ballard's works, on the other hand, are not an exploration of outer space, but are "to be read more accurately as an exploration of inner space." (1)

The purpose behind this thesis has been to show that science fiction as a new genre includes a great range of

(1) David Ketterer , New worlds for Old (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1974), p. 178.

philosophical ideas that make it deserve close critical analysis. It shows us how the future---the human future---contains an element of the unpredictable. Life is not static : humanity has become unified and has reached outer planets and thus our senses have been open to things we were not aware of before. This in itself is miraculous because it fulfils the dream of all living creatures by satisfying our instinctive craving to know or expand our consciousness. Having started on this path, it is only natural for literature to depict this new change in our age.

CHAPTER ONE

Discussions of detective fiction, fairy tales or any other literary genre, do not necessarily begin with definitions because generally speaking, everybody seems to know the boundaries of the genre in question. With science fiction it is a different matter. The difference is because the other genres are easily defined by their subject matter and form, detective stories, for example, are about crime, westerns are about cowboys, Indians and life on the frontiers.

For science fiction it is a different case. There is no clear formula by which one can characterize science fiction. The themes are as varied as can be;

The alien-encounter story (the alien may be malevolent, benevolent or neither), the time-travel story, the fable of the questing scientist, mad or otherwise, the dystopian satire, the postapocalypse story, the evolutionary fable --- each of these is a recognizable science fiction category with its own formulaic characteristics, and there are many other categories as well.⁽¹⁾

(1) Mark Rose, Alien Encounters : An Anatomy of Science Fiction (Cambridge, Massachusetts : Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 2.

The setting of science fiction also varies widely : it may be as common place as any contemporary city or 'as exotic as the vicinity of a neutron star.'. (2)

The only constant factor in science fiction is that it contains an element of the fantastic. It portrays a world that is in some respects different from ours, as, for example, stories set in the future or on other planets, they may describe the impact of strange inventions or strange elements upon the world, as, for example, the alien invasion stories or evolutionary fables.

This raises the question of how science fiction is distinguished from fantasy, and this is how most critics form their definitions.

Generally speaking, they emphasize the fact that science fiction has elements of realism and respects facts, while fantasy is known for its 'self indulgence'. (3) Robert Heinlein, for example, defines science fiction as:

realistic speculation about possible future events based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present, on a thorough understanding of the nature and

(2) Ibid., p. 3

(3) Ibid.

significance of the scientific method.⁽⁴⁾

In other words, for Heinlein, science fiction is predictive.

Kingsley Amis defines it as :

... that class of prose narrative treating of a situation that could not arise in the world we know, but which is hypothesized on the basis of some innovation in science or technology, or pseudo-science or pseudo-technology.⁽⁵⁾

At the heart of this definition is the concept that science fiction is a kind of narrative derived from 'some innovation in science or technology, or pseudo science or pseudo technology.' This is an important element which differentiates it from fantasy, which is not in any way factual but involves instead anything that is obviously impossible, as for example the supernatural. According to Amis's definition, science fiction is not possible until phenomena are explained on a rational basis according to some known or hypothesized laws of the universe, instead of being explained

(4) Ibid., p. 3-4

(5) Kingsley Amis, New Maps of Hell (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1960), p. 18.

on a supernatural basis. Pure fantasy on the other hand, does not need to achieve "verisimilitude" and win the "willing suspension of disbelief" through scientific plausibility. However, the two forms are not always pure --- fantasy can have science fiction elements and science fiction have fantasy elements as we see later in C. S. Lewis's space trilogy.⁽⁶⁾

Another important science fiction critic describes this genre as :

.... it describes an imaginary invention or discovery in the natural sciences. The more serious pieces of this fiction arise from speculation about what may happen if science makes an extraordinary discovery.

The romance is an attempt to anticipate this discovery, and its impact upon society, and to see how mankind may adjust to the new conditions. Naturally, the resulting narrative is often utopian, or satiric from a utopian view point.⁽⁷⁾

(6) It is important to point out the fact that science fiction writers have often used literary traditions of fantasy as, for example, myth in C. S. Lewis.

(7) J.O. Bailey, Pilgrims Through Time and Space (Connecticut Greenwood Press Publishers, 1947), p. 10.

In this definition, emphasis is on the scientific content of the story and its creating an alternative possible future. Again, this means that science fiction is prophetic. It is --- and it is not, for most of its early predictions have proven to be false.

This makes us ask how much of the science in science fiction is correct or true.

Science is important in science fiction because today science seems to be a more valid way of explaining our perception of reality and of the world around us, than religion or even myth. Yet, the writer 'must know something of the science that shapes man's surroundings and world view.'⁽⁸⁾ because he speaks of things that 'may possibly happen if' He then has to be consistent to the theory or idea that he creates so that the ordinary reader would not perceive a scientific or technical error or inconsistency .

There is, however, one more definition of science fiction which I find most appropriate for the analysis of the different writers chosen for this thesis. It is that of Basil Wells :

(8) Gregory Benford: "Science and Science Fiction" P. 30. in College English Association Critic, Vol XXXVII, No. 1 (Nov. 1974), p. 30.

Science fiction, in its poorest sense, should mean entertaining, colorful fiction that either extrapolates what logically, or possibly, will take place in the future, or creates a more or less alien culture, or cultures, and records the probable impact upon it by an extrapolated Terran civilization. Successful science fiction, hopefully, brings temporary suspension of disbelief and a sense of identification with either the humans or the likeable or off beat alien entities involved. Along with this should be the feeling of WHAT IF ? and WHY NOT ? The seeds of speculative thought are sprouted---hopefully, the reader is hooked on science fiction (9)

This means that science fiction deals with man in relation to his changing surroundings (whether those changes are scientific or sociological, psychological or even theological) and to help him to know his status in those new surroundings. Science is still an important background element which gives reality to possible events, (usually in the future) by extrapolating from present

(9) Basil Wells, "Definition" in College English Association Critic, op. cit., p. 34.

scientific knowledge or known and existing cultural and social trends. It is a controlled way of thinking and dreaming about the future. It integrates science with the fears and hopes that spring from man's unconscious. Because of these two elements it is not just speculative and it is not just predictive. It is both at the same time.

In any case, as the original name of science fiction, which is "scientific romance" suggests, science fiction is regarded as a transformation of earlier forms of romance : the utopian romance or quest romance. If we consider H. G. Wells's The Time Machine, for example, we find that the time traveller expects to find a future more advanced than the one that he lives in. As a quest romance, we find that the purpose of his taking those trips into other times is to find out the truth about the future and it ends with 'the apocalyptic moment of revelation in which the transcendent and the mundane interpenetrate as the traveler witnesses the fate of life on earth.'⁽¹⁰⁾

As in romances, we do not have psychological analysis of the characters or exact images of the world as we know it. Rather, we hear of marvels and adventures

(10) Rose, pp. 7-8.