

Notes on Science Fiction

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From:

Patrick Parrinder,
Science Fiction: Its Criticism and Teaching.
London: Methuen, 1980.

Muy buena introducción a la ciencia ficción desde un planteamiento teórico, estructuralista/sociológico, situándola frente a otros géneros más estudiados en la tradición académica y viéndola como un sincretismo de ellos.

An excellent introduction to science fiction from a theoretical, structuralist/sociological stance, situating it vis a vis other genres more frequently studied in the academic tradition, and presenting SF as a syncretism of the same.

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xix: "like other modern kinds of narrative, science fiction consistently innovates upon the older forms to which it may be referred."

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Some notes on the previous:

Scientific romance: "the use of scientific (or, more often, quasi-scientific) elements in highly coloured romantic fiction." *Frankenstein* as example. But the *Frankenstein* preface claims SF status, 6 "It is with this brief manifesto that the self-consciousness of science fiction might be said to begin" Wells's preface to 1933 *Scientific Romances* is his most influential contribution to SF definition. One fantastic premise developed in consistently realistic mode. But why a single premise? This is gratuitous. Magazine SF: notions of 'hard SF' and 'space opera'. Heinlein: convergence of SF and futurology; analysis of implications of space travel, galactic imperialism... New Wave: denounced by Blish as travesty of SF imagination. Parrinder favours Aldiss's non-generic approach, vs logical-simplistic definitions. Parrinder vs. C.S. Lewis's approach to SF as mythopoesis: seems to imply that sources of mythopoesis are eternal and unchanging (—a mystical/mystifying approach.)

SF not dissolved into postmodernist fantasy, although this is an extension. SF as a necessary cognitive/imaginative mode.

SF reflects society: as product, message and document (in its role as social criticism). Manifest content of SF has to be studied with reference to the latent causes and

significance of its imaginative structures. SF as product of late capitalism/imperialism/industrialism: "the strange new worlds of science fiction often present ad distorted and yet recognizable image of capitalism, imperialism or industrialiation" (32). Goldmannian analysis: SF has evolved as a developing response to the scientific world view. Fandom: "Science fiction . . . has given rise to a subculture because it promotes a shared view of reality towards which the rest of society is felt to be significantly hostile or indifferent" (36). SF fans not specifically revolutionary: "science fiction acts not only to propagate dreams of liberation, but to sublimate the anxieties of those who fear the impermanence of the status quo rather than its repressiveness" (37, *But not a very coherent analysis*). Fandom and specialized reading, personal recommendations, collecting... "it is not necessarily wrong to look upon the fans as victims of cultural impoverishment" but they develop values autonomously (42).

SF as thought: often ideas ahead of their time, SF as "thinking machine" (Shippey). SF not formula fiction if it is a thinking machine, but not neglected high literature either. Popular lit. not necessairly uninventive or poor. Not inferior, but marginal (Angenot), expressing in a (degraded) form "themes and expressions which are repressed in high culture" (A, 46), paraliterature, a product of the industrial age. E.g. the cult of men of action, superseded in high literature, as "a thwarted refusal, on the part of popular authors, to capitulate to the obsession with the limitations and uncertainties of modern life which preoccupies the realists" (47); also blindness to reality.

"Such blindness may keep alive a vision of large possibilities, but it may also represent the unthinking repetition of formulas and stereotypes from the literary past" (47) = SF as romance.

Romance vs. realism, more open to fantasy, symbol and myth (Chase). Parrinder favours a consistent connection between the various senses of the term "romance". Gillian Beer: romance as "subjective form", absorbing, coherent and arbitrary vision. SF however hides arbitrariness with a mask of necessity (51). SF not mythology, not whole cultural outlook, rather a marginal fictional mode, a "mytholgy" in Barthes' sense; Vehicle of ideological fantasy rather than modern myth. Not specifically formulaic (vs Cawelti), all literature is then. Formulas in SF often used knowingly and with ironic intent (58). Domestication of strangeness (Wells) as aim of genre. Romance and realism not opposition but dialectical relationship, characteristic SF has avoided the crudest pre-given formulas: not simply romance, a tension with SF element.

Most precedents of SF belong this tradition. SF result of enlightenment and scientific ideals, rejection of past orthodoxy: "As early as 1840, Alexis de Tocqueville was predicting in the second part of his *Democracy in America* that a fiction drawing its imaginative sustenance from the future would soon assume a privileged place in the new bourgeois republics" (70). SF as didactic social critique often ideologically faulty or incomplete: "While science fiction is indeed a means of 'dramatising social inquiry', in Amis's words, it would be untrue to suggest that its authors have, as a group, pursued such an inquiry more relentlessly

or more disinterestedly than their counterparts in realistic fiction" (72). Darko Suvin's notion of cognitive estrangement with a social critique bias, "a series of analogies for, or perhaps imaginative rehearsals of, such possible changes" (73). Shklovksi and Brecht. Suvin's theory is not descriptive but normative, social criticism is usually an unfulfilled purpose. Many estranging devices not necessarily socially significant; gratuitousness of invention cannot be reduced to didacticism. Scientific world view vs. utopian element (After Marx, Darwin...), but also scientific "avant-gardism" leading to conquest of nature etc. Galactic imperialism: "such stories are at once a projection of twentieth-century imperialist violence and a prediction of a non-utopian future in which the brute facts of power and self-assertion will remain very much what they are" (82). Contemporary fables of power become tentative and ambiguous. but conflict science/utopia takes new forms as the genre develops.

Epic dignity linked to history: SF and futurology, real cognitive status is to be found in analogical reference to present. SF 'epics' often actually stock romances. Wells and SF as hcal. novel the other way round. Lukács on hcal novel.: pseudo-historicity of Salammbo detected in most SF 'epics', banal costume-dramas. Often frustrated epic, events depicted obliquely (towards fable), e.g. Wells's *The Time Machine*. Anticipations and fantasy not really different. Technological determinism and evolutionism as basis for predictions. Haldane and Bernal. Spenglerian fatalism. Epic gives way to costume drama, thin pseudo-history or mock epic. Alternative histories as result of SF self-consciousness of language and conventions.

"Like some ageing space-freighter, the language of SF has

usually been content to lumber along with its cargo of corn towards Lunarpark Bathos" (106). Self-conscious stylists only in the 60s; semiotic & stylistic studies later. Hoax language in early instances, but novel events require new style: interplay of points of view between the familiar and the unknown.

Delany and SF as language; Angenot and the 'absent paradigm' criterion: "The SF narrative always assumes a 'not-said' that regulates the message. The rhetoric of credibility aims at having the reader believe not so much in what is literally said as in what is assumed or presupposed" (Angenot, qtd. in 114). Delany: dialogue imaginary / empirical worlds: ok, mediated by intertextual reference; Strong intertextual collective myth of SF lost today, though parody made possible by convention. Philip K. Dick and the post-scientific use of psychological realities; scientific world-view disintegrates, fictions multiply. Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* "is a science fiction classic because it exemplifies the creative fusion of romance, fable, epic, and parody" (123). "Science fiction can show few more powerful embodiments of the novelty—the new thing— on which this fictional genre is based" (130).

Wittgensteinian echoes of unknowing: "Man, however, must find ways of speaking of that which is novel, and he does so by imitation and recombination of the modes of discourse already at his command. Science fiction provides a particular instance of this, building up its stories of the new and strange by instituting a dialogue with what we already know. In this complex construction that is the SF story we may find bound together . . . the elements of romance, fable, epic, and parody" (130).

Teaching Science Fiction:

The 1st course by Sam Moskowitz, NY, 1953; then Hillegas 1962; by 1976 2000 courses in USA. Much less in Britain. VS dogmatic teaching of SF as "the future" as Toffler demands. Move from paraliterature to literature, but must be studied as literature.

Survey of works taught (Williamson) includes: Asimov, *I, robot*, Bradbury, *The Martian Chronicles*, Heinlein, *The Moon Is a Hard Mistress* and *Stranger in a Strange Land*; Herbert, *Dune*, Huxley, *Brave New World*, Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, W.M. Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, Pohl and Kornbluth, *Space Merchants*, Silverberg, ed. *SF Hall of Fame 1*; Wells, *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds*. (a chauvinist selection, though the American emphasis is understandable.

Teaching SF expands traditional assumptions of teaching lit: towards science, sociology, politics... .; novelty effect also in teaching lit., difficult to approach text (not SF). Parrinder favours exploring conjunctions of strange and familiar in SF course.)

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