

Science Fiction

“Science fiction deals with improbable possibilities, fantasy with plausible impossibilities.” Miriam Allen deFord, Foreword, *Elsewhere, Elsewhen, Elsehow*

Characteristics in the development of SF:

“Writers of SF make use of the discoveries, theories, and speculations in the fields of science that appeal to the imagination at the time the story is written. So long as something is thought to be scientific at the time the story is written, it should not be discarded subsequently as mere fantasy.” (AoW, 4) Often they popularize the science in the process.

“No society can develop a science fiction until it reaches a certain stage of scientific inquiry and technological development; before that time, it will not have the writers or the audience for SF because, individually and collectively, the literary interest lies elsewhere.” (AoW, 5)

“...Belief in ongoing change. So long as Western civilization did not basically question the static mythos in which Earth is the center of creation and humanity’s life and destiny are framed by the Fall and Final Judgment, there could be little speculation about alternative possibilities in the future.” (AoW, 5)

The Gothic Influence – “Giving to the emerging SF a new dimension and an emotional intensity it had not previously known.” (AoW, 10). Escapist fiction of the 18th and 19th centuries that traded on current fears, hopes and obsessions, thus allowing people to explore and face them safely. “It could venture where the solid realistic social novel could not go. Although the social novel is seen as the dominant literary form of the nineteenth century, its doppelganger, the Gothic, kept in silent step with it, from *Frankenstein* at the century’s beginning to *Dracula* at its end.” (TYS, 16) Science Fiction has proudly kept up this tradition of social and psychological commentary.

Hugo Gernsback’s *Amazing Stories*, the first of the SF specialist pulp magazines, “was an anomaly in the pulp marketplace by virtue of its ... editor’s insistence that its fiction should have a didactic component dedicated to the popularization of science and a celebration of the utopian

potential of scientific progress. Other SF pulps ... diluted Gernsback's manifesto considerably, preferring a kind of futuristic costume drama, which duplicated the standard characteristics of pulp melodrama, but the genre retained a strong and not-unjustified sense of its own uniqueness and ambition." (AoW, 63)

SF Tropes:

Imaginary Voyages – Started as “travel books” in Middle Ages and Renaissance. Sir Thomas More's fantastic island of *Utopia* (1516) turned the travel book into the Imaginary Voyage. Applies to both terrestrial (islands and the polar regions being especially popular (early arctic explorers were actually instructed to look for openings in the earth leading to lands inside the planet at the poles)) and extraterrestrial destinations, the latter starting in the 1630s. Early Voyages took place in the “here-and-now,” there being enough unexplored land and little enough scientific knowledge to make voyages in the future unnecessary. *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift is a good example, as is *Star Trek*. (AoW, 5)

Utopias – Also from More's “Utopia” (1516) – “It gave its name to those innumerable societies portrayed well into the 20th century that advocated change and foresaw the perfectibility of the political state.” (AoW, 5) Originally a place to be found, but later a state to be achieved.

Dystopias – Sometimes the search for a utopia gone wrong. Always a warning about what could happen if we don't change our ways. Some influential dystopias are George Orwell's *1984*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, Eugene Zamiatin's *We*.

Lost Race/Lost Colony – Another version of the Imaginary Voyage. This involves finding a people separated from the rest of humanity, usually through impassable terrain, and developing a fabulous society far removed from Western materialism and power-hungriness. Very popular in the late 19th and 20th centuries. Later updated as Lost Colony, with human colonies that have been out of contact with main human society. Also could include space travel and either alien societies or parallel evolution. Examples include Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Lost World*, or Christopher Stasheff's *The Wizard in Spite of Himself* series.

Conscious Forecasts of the Future - Taking current events/trends in society and/or technology and projecting them into the future. “As the Renaissance deepened into the Enlightenment, the concept that reason was the highest faculty of the mind drew increasing favor in intellectual

circles – and a rational mind *must* exist in a rational universe whose laws could be discerned by further investigation,” (AoW, 9) and could therefore be projected into the future. Often the author will add an additional speculative, often improbable, event, like an alien invasion, and project out from there.

What If/Alternate Pasts – Taking a pivotal moment of the past and changing it, then coming up with a plausible scenario of what would have happened next. Sometimes they involve fairly basic, historically accurate questions. What if Lincoln had not been shot in 1865? What if Rome had not fallen? There are a number of short story collections on this theme; i.e. *Alternate Generals*, edited by Harry Turtledove. Sometimes the author will use an improbable, fantastic event as their turning point, just to play with history a bit. Eric Flint wrote *1632*, in which an entire town from modern West Virginia gets scooped up and put down in 1632 Germany.

Progress - “Such a view [see quote in Conscious Forecasts of the Future, above] envisioned the perfectibility both of humanity and of the sociopolitical state, creating an optimism that remains even in the 1990s at the heart of much SF.” (AoW, 9)

Catastrophe/Apocalypse – End of the world, last person on earth, sometimes (especially in the late 19th and early 20th centuries) including an enclave of people/civilization saved by one visionary leader, often a scientist. Includes both natural disasters and human-caused disasters. Sometimes used to show “the dark side of the vision of humanity’s perfectibility.” (AoW, 11) Examples: Walter M. Miller’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, H. M. Hoover’s *This Time of Darkness*.

Mad/Hubristic Scientist – *Frankenstein* (1818) was the first exemplar of this trope, with Shelley’s “tale of a being patched together from cadavers and given life by a scientist who has trespassed beyond those limits set for man. Her monster is Dr. Frankenstein, who conjures up the image of Faust as he plays God and then recoils in horror from the creature he has created.” (AoW, 11) Another example would be Kage Baker’s Company Series, starting with *In the Garden of Eden*. This series deals with immortality and time travel developed by a company. It hasn’t happened yet (the series is ongoing), but I have a feeling that the company is going to regret it.

Alternate Worlds – From the subatomic to the alternate universe. The first was an 1858 story called “The Diamond Lens” by Fitz-James O’Brien. “Using a perfect lens, its protagonist, the microscopist Linley, discovers in

a drop of water a subatomic world in which the beautiful nymph, Animula dwells; he falls in love with her but inadvertently allows the water to evaporate so that she dies. He goes mad, ending up in a madhouse.” (AoW, 12) A further example is Robert A. Heinlein’s *The Number of the Beast*, in which the heroes travel to a multitude of alternate universes from different books and stories.

Mutants, Androids, Supermen and Clones – From creature features to cyborgs to “advanced” humans’ relationships with “normal” humans. Mostly replaced psychological abnormalities as a distinctly SF trope by pinpointing their cause in the physical. Includes various sorts of methods of change – surgery, genetic engineering, evolution, radiation, etc. David Weber has a series starting with *Mutineer’s Moon* that involves enhanced humans with a much elongated lifespan, and Lois McMaster Bujold’s Miles Vorkosigan series, starting with *The Warrior’s Apprentice*, has a mutant as the main character.

Military/Future Wars – Began with “The Battle of Dorking: Reminiscences of a Volunteer” published in *Blackwood’s* in May 1871. It involved a German invasion of Britain ending in British defeat because Britain refused to build up her defenses due to the cost. There was already a sense of doomsday hysteria with the unexpected defeat of the major European power of France by the small nation of Prussia in the Franco-Prussian war and the rapidly increasing pace of change, both technological and social; Nationalism and Imperialism were on the rise. These types of stories became very popular as they both reflected and fed the hysteria while extolling the glories of war. They often used old tactics to fight “modern wars;” their fascination lay in the players and the outcomes. The “German menace” and the “yellow hordes” often played a leading role. There is speculation that these stories actually affected the course of the two World Wars. Some of these books were very scholarly: *The Great Pacific War: A History of the American-Japanese Campaign of 1931-33* (1925) “is often cataloged by libraries as nonfiction.” (AoW, 17) After the horrors of WWI, the tone changed considerably. Much less extolling and much more doomsday, although many Americans were still writing the former. Military SF is currently very popular, with David Weber being one of the foremost names in the field, know especially for his Honor Harrington series, which begins with *On Basilisk Station*. Much modern Military SF comes under the heading of Space Opera.

Space Opera – The main feature of Space Opera is scale. Even if the action is not happening on an interstellar scale, the scope for and the awareness of interstellar action has to be there. There’s also usually casts

of thousands - even if just as extras, big ideas, big conflicts. It's operatic. Inside these defining characteristics, there are endless variations. David Weber writes a number of Space Opera books and series and Lois McMaster Bujold's Miles Vorkosigan series fits. Star Trek is definitely Space Operatic. This is an old tradition in fiction; they often call Honor Harrington (one of Weber's characters) as Horatio Hornblower (from C. S. Forester's series) in space.

Anti-War – Especially prominent in the 1960s – 70s. “In June 1968 two groups of science fiction writers with opposing views on U.S. involvement in Vietnam published angry advertisements in *Galaxy*. ... This debate was to achieve the ultimate in public irony nearly a decade later at the 1976 World Science Fiction Convention in Kansas City, where Vietnam veteran Joe Haldeman's bitter anti war story *The Forever War* received the Hugo Award for best novel of the year the same weekend the convention's guest of honor, Robert A. Heinlein, was booed for, in essence, arguing that nuclear war was inevitable and may in fact improve the species.” (AoW, 224-5).

The Scientific romance – The exciting adventure story, possibly with a love story and definitely some science (or at least pseudoscience) as an integral part of the story. Jules Verne was a master of this – he used real science of his day to make his adventure stories accessible and relevant. Edgar Rice Burroughs was also a master – his stories used science much more loosely, but are much bigger on the romance portion of the equation. The pulps embraced this trope – the more exotic and adventurous the better.

New Wave – A movement that began in Britain in the 1960s “Reacting in direct opposition to what they saw as the SF establishment ... these “new wave” writers had relatively little interest in science and technology per se and were frequently technophobic. They tended toward leftist political values and they prized stylistic experimentation above all else. Infected, perhaps, by the general depression left by the loss of empire, their work also tended toward a depiction of disasters and decay, entropy in all its forms. On the brighter side, they were also interested in sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll.” (AoW, 225) The focus of the movement was the British SF magazine *New Worlds*, edited by Michael Moorcock from 1964 on. Michael Moorcock also wrote a number of novels.

Feminism – In the mid-1960s and early 1970s the women's movement transformed SF. Women had been writing Science Fiction in surprisingly high numbers, but the women's movement changed what they and some

of their male colleagues wrote about. Women's issues, gender identity, and gender roles are some of the topics that were discussed seriously and on a wide scale for the first time. Ursula K. Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness* was a landmark novel discussing, among other things, gender stereotypes.

Cyberpunk – Started in 1983. “The cyberpunks fused a strong interest in technology, and particularly in cybernetics and biotechnology, a generally left-wing or libertarian (antigovernment, anti-big business) political stance, and down-and-dirty punk attitudes with a literary aesthetic borrowed, at least in part, from Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and *film noir*.” (AoW, 232) William Gibson's *Neuromancer* epitomizes the movement.

Bibliography:

(AoW) – Barron, Neil, ed.; *Anatomy of Wonder 4: A Critical Guide to Science Fiction*; New Providence, NJ; R. R. Bowker; 1995. This is a standard reference in Science Fiction and includes essays on various topic relating to science fiction and a number of bibliographies. Also includes timelines and other useful lists. Highly recommended.

(TYS) – Aldiss, Brian W., Wingrove, David; *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction*; New York; Atheneum; 1986. I didn't get the chance to read much of this, but this is also a standard work in the field. I enjoyed what I did read; Aldiss has been involved in the field for a long time, and has some interesting ideas and perspectives. Update of an earlier work *Billion Year Spree*.