

Mobility of Science Fiction as a Literary Genre

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Abstract

The article is an attempt to establish mobility of SF expressed mostly by the works of writers belonging to the New Wave – one of the most important breakthroughs in the history of the genre and, even more importantly, that its effects continue into the 21st century. Firstly, the article focuses on the changing parameters of the theoretical constructs of the genre as decades go by, meaning that the more SF works proliferated and touched upon every aspect of humanity, the more inadequate became the definitions which attempted to encapsulate the whole of the genre.

Keywords: science fiction (SF), New Wave, mobility, genre, reaction, interaction, theme, style.

1.0. Introduction

If the Golden Age, in the end, proved to be elusive and rife with contradictions, then New Wave made a conscious effort to continue the trend. If the former period had particular works that transcended narrow genre categories dictated by the pulp magazine format, then it was New Wave that produced a barrage of works specifically focusing on moving the genre forward by firmly opposing its past. The tropes associated with Gernsbackian and Campbellian microcosmic and macrocosmic hard SF extrapolations became literalized; cognitive metaphors started running rampantly through the streets and within households; in other words, people in the 1960s started living in science-fictional times. The explosion of cultural semiosis in terms of the sexual revolution, counter culture, feminism, the Civil Rights movement, Vietnam, the Bomb, the landing on the Moon, rock 'n' roll, LSD, etc., naturally begot radical changes in the mainstream literature and the ghetto niches of the fantastic genres. Within the former realm these changes can, for now, be summarized as postmodernism, but on the other hand a peculiar marriage between modernism and postmodernism occurred. Science fiction authors, even more so than their counterparts beyond the literary ghetto, had finally become modernized. But before this mixture between the so-called outmoded and progressive tendencies in SF can be analyzed, some introductions are in order.

2.0. New Wave and First Reaction

New Wave SF is most commonly associated with the 1960s and the early 1970s. New Wave SF is predominantly a reaction against the past, against the “preconceptions of the pulp magazine idiom”. That idiom became outdated for “extrapolating the Now”, meaning insufficient for proper analysis and speculation of modern times. The genre’s past was deemed inadequate in terms of content – the modern and relevant social issues – as well as how the stories were written. Style, therefore, was set on a pedestal and has remained one of the most recognizable features of the period.

As it is noted, Asimov's use of language in the Foundation series reveals more about the nature of such Golden Age projections than the optimistic and world-changing ideas they are explicitly trying to convey. “The consciousness of his characters, as it is objectified in speech, shows absolutely no historical development and hence fails to evoke in the reader any feeling for the future universe they inhabit” (Elkins, 1976). Asimov's case is extreme, yet crucial to understanding the fierce reaction of the New Wavers, namely that historical change is accompanied by change in language, especially in literature, and thus should be reflected in fiction. How characters speak and how the narrative conveys the story are two elements that comprise the historicity of fiction. SF authors failed to realize that this intrinsic connection can lead their readers to ahistorical extrapolations à la Asimov’s Foundation series, regardless of the intentional hard SF extrapolations. Delany's objection that style should not be opposed to content is pertinent, yet it should not lead us to the conclusion that, as a category, it is therefore useless, but only that we need to distance ourselves from the earlier Russian formalism with its pre-Kantian, pre-critical notion of style, and lean towards the Bakhtinian reasoning that “style is an intrinsically social category” (Freedman, 2000). John W. Taylor in his contrastive analysis of pulpstyle and New Wave – “From Pulpstyle to Innerspace: The Stylistics of American New-Wave SF” – takes some of the representative texts of both “styles” to see the exact differences. Murray Leinster's short story “First Contact” (1945), for instance, is riddled with stylistic markers, such as onomastics, pleonasm, and excessive anaphora. The specific use of the name Tommy Dort, to be specific, connotes the WASP identity of the character, while a name like Buck fits very well for an alien with

repulsive physical features. Pleonasm and excessive anaphoras, however, are distinct characteristics of pulpstyle which relies heavily on a fast reader inattentive to detail, and it was a common feature back then for magazines with the penny-a-word policy. On top of that, explicit reference, such as “the sneaking brutal ferocity of a Japanese” (Taylor, 1990) completely undermines the overall progressive theme of the story – establishing first contact, opening yourselves to the “other”. Leinster was betrayed by his own language; presupposing a major historical change in our space-faring future, such as first contact with an alien species, is impossible without abolishing racial prejudices inherited from WWII first.

On the completely opposite end, we have the stylistic explosion of the New Wavers such as Samuel R. Delany, Roger Zelazny, and Harlan Ellison. The very titles of some of their short stories, such as “Aye, and Gomorrah ...” (1967), “Time Considered as a Helix of Semi-Precious Stones” (1968), “A Rose for Ecclesiastes” (1963), “The Doors of His Face, The Lamps of His Mouth” (1965), “‘Repent, Harlequin!’ Said the Ticktockman” (1965) are plays on allusions, historical references, and thematic connotations. “Ecclesiastes” alludes to the Old Testament and points to the theme of vanity; “The Doors of His Face [...]” to the Biblical Leviathan and the theme of sea-hunting; “Gomorrah” to the Biblical city, and the theme of vice and sexual deviation, etc. In the two stories, Zelazny bombards the reader with allusions to classical authors such as Baudelaire, Blake, Auden, Swift, and Wilde. In terms of visual aspects, some of the scenes in J.G. Ballard’s novels refer to the surrealist paintings of Salvador Dalí and Marx Ernst. In Disch’s “Camp Concentration” (1968) Thomas Mann, Marlowe, Aquinas, and others are a constant source of reference. This play on allusiveness presupposes higher cultural literacy than what the pulpstyle texts offer. In contrast to short noun phrases of pulpstyle titles, such as *Foundation*, a New Wave title such as “Time Considered as a Helix of Semi-Precious Stones” is already redolent of collocations, metaphors, and word-play (Taylor, 1990); “‘Repent, Harlequin!’ Said the Ticktockman” contains a sonoric connection to the author, Harlequin-Harlan, and the story quickly enters the hectic actions of the titular jester, filled to the brim with slapstick humor and whimsy found in the archetypal Harlequin of *Commedia d’ell’Arte*. We have not even begun to tarry in the themes and plots of these titles, and already the Bakhtinian carnivalesque confronts us.

It was high time to redirect the focus of SF sensibility from outer space to inner space, to the realm of subjectivity, to the realm of the mind, dreams, the unconscious, to the realm that had been hitherto neglected in SF for far too long. It was a path “from inconceivably remote to the inescapably present” (Greenland 66). While the high modernist phase of literature had long ago furnished its characters with a mind that represented the anguish and perspective of troubling subjectivity, and of modernization happening within, SF sought destiny from without and mostly saw rockets and space ships as logical extensions of reason. Freud, Jung, existentialism, and many other names and trends of the “soft” sciences had, by the time of the Swinging Sixties, become a mainstay in postmodernism and mainstream fiction by and large. New challenges awaited the genre and the New Wavers were conscious of it. The following lines from Disch’s novel refer directly to the new orientation: “It’s common knowledge that for twenty years a small but powerful clique in Washington has been burning up millions and billions of taxpayers’ dollars to get us into Outer Space. While all of Inner Space had yet to be explored” (Disch, 1999).

What is most commonly associated with these experiments and explorations of inner space is the use of psychedelics, and LSD emerged as the symbol of the new paraspaces. As SF was certainly not immune to the 1960s countercultural influences, LSD and similar psychedelic substances provided an immediate concrete means of entering inner space. This is not to say that drugs were the main or even frequent means of providing “source material” for the genre’s practitioners, but the SF implications of exploring new modes of perception, of grasping the relation between - what Philip K. Dick termed *koinos kosmos* and *idios kosmos* – were too good an opportunity to miss, for “psychedelic drugs release internal energy and speed consciousness in the same exponential proportions as nuclear and electronic space-time expansions” (Greenland, 1983). The Space Age world of external, conspicuous hardware was being replaced by invisible electronics and nuclear energy. Coupled with the ever-increasing skepticism towards the government, fueled by war, political scandals, civil disorders, etc., the concept of a unified, shared, and stable reality – generally assumed by the SF of the past – was in a state of permanent dissolution. The New Wavers gladly entered the fray.

Therefore, in addition to style and inner space, the third best known appellation of the period is entropy, and it too stands as a reaction against the dominant trends of the past. Entropy became a convenient metaphor of the time, and SF quickly appropriated it for its own vocabulary. Later on we shall see how all three pillars of reaction reverberate throughout these works; for now it is sufficient to see how, on the general level, entropy embodied the New Wave radicalism. The notion is derived from the second law of thermodynamics, which essentially states that “while the energy in any closed system remains constant, its heat spontaneously decreases as the energy becomes more and more dissipated and unavailable for work” (Greenland 1983). Entropy, then, is the measure of the amount of energy which is unavailable to do work, that is to say, a measure of the disorder of the system, a measure of disorganization/chaos. Since the 19th century, it has become integral in interdisciplinary applications, ranging from mathematics to information theory. By the 1960s, however, it had become fused with the *zeitgeist*, interpreted one-sidedly to give the period a metaphysical flavor grounded in actual science. The period of growing uncertainty, pessimism, and perceived destabilization of subjective and objective realities found its distilled expression in formulas proving that the universe around us and inside us is tending towards irreversible heat-death. Both genre and mainstream writers used the term for the purpose of connotation, usually tending towards pessimism. Moorcock and his fellow New Wavers appropriated it to give voice to their preoccupations with the

dissolutions experienced by a modern urban dweller no longer travelling in supra-mundane paraspaces: 'If time could stand still,' said Hira reflectively. 'I suppose we should all be as good as dead. The whole business of entropy so accurately reflects the human condition. To remain alive one must burn fuel, use up heat, squander resources, and yet that very action contributes to the end of the universe – the heat death of everything! But to become still, to use the minimum of energy – that's pointless. It is to die, effectively. What a dreadful dilemma'. (Moorcock, 1977)

The apocalyptic conclusions stem from seeing the universe as a closed system, the underlying determinism of irreversibility, and, as Spinrad's quote above indicates, interpreting the universe as a clockwork mechanism. The main concern here, however, is not whether the authors interpreted the phenomenon from physics correctly, but their usage of it. For the New Wavers, it was often a buzzword, something that is fashionable and should be used regardless of relevancy. On the other hand, authors like Moorcock, Ballard, and Dick saw in it an opportunity for SF humanist extrapolations. In the case of Philip K. Dick entropy even gained epistemological and ontological proportions. The SF of the Campbellian mould regarded the universe as the ultimate tool of mankind, something that can be known, controlled and adjusted, the aliens, of course, being part of the equation. The simplified concept of entropy, then, gave the new generation a powerful conceptual tool, a cognitive metaphor to project a world based on the increasing decay, chaos, and, most importantly, categorical negations. Regardless of our rational intentions, the world is inexorably changing, and not only the dimensions of inner space along with it, but also the conceptual apparatus that governs our discourse. While the academic world talked of post-structuralism and deconstruction to grasp the inevitable onslaught of categorical re-evaluations, the New Wavers relished decadence, danced at the end of time, and wrote romances of entropy; in other words, entropy in the SF realm was accompanied by generic transformations and transvaluations. The apocalypse was not averted by any brave feat of engineering; on the contrary, it was embraced: "The end of the world. Let me tell you about the end of the world. It happened fifty years ago. Maybe a hundred. And since then it's been lovely. I mean it. Nobody tries to bother you. You can relax. You know what? I like the end of the world". (Disch, 1974)

3.0. Genre Mobility: Interaction

Efflorescence of style, the probing of inner space, and coquetting with entropy aesthetically launched the genre to unprecedented heights. As the above-mentioned three pillars of reaction (style, inner space, entropy) functioned as a direct opposition against the Golden Age in general, it became only logical for New Wave writers to seek creative inspiration in literature originating outside the "ghetto" walls of SF. If the 1950s started opening the genre up to higher literary standards, book publishing and the non-adolescent reading public, then it was the 1960s "in which SF discovered the Present. It is no coincidence that it was also the decade in which general reading public discovered SF" (Aldiss and Harrison, 1979). The discovery was multi-layered – the general reading public started discovering the genre, and the genre started discovering the general reading tastes. The explosion of the genre was most noticeable in SF spreading to mainstream territories and interacting with the literary trends of its time. Ironically, though, this also meant that the genre needed to re-discover the past, but not of its own genre, but that of mainstream literature; in other words, the genre needed to acquire some of the characteristics of modernism in order to truly become modern. Besides William Burroughs and Thomas Pynchon, SF needed the style and panache of James Joyce and T.S. Eliot to express the modern concerns of its period. Modernism is, of course, too complex and varied to warrant a detailed study of its relation to the genre developments of the post-WWII period; however, there are some relevant historical and conceptual connections that can shed some light on the unique position of the New Wave period.

As many critics note, at the time of New Wave SF "briefly becomes modernist, just as European bourgeois literature had done a half century earlier, when it found itself caught in crisis between 'old' – including, of course, old set of narrative thematics and plots – which was dying, and a 'new' which could not yet be born" (Pfeil, 1990). Just as the aesthetic explosion of modernism reacted against the morality of Victorian literature, so did the aesthetic awakening of New Wave react against the Campbellian morality of the Golden Age. In both modernism and New Wave there occurs a crisis in history as well as literary form, and crisis implies a crossroads. Modernism is imperfect modernization; it stands between traditional, agrarian, pre-capitalist social formations and the emerging urban, industrial, capitalist ones. It is a time of rapid industrialization, of World War I, of the dying of the last of the empires, and, most importantly, of the visible processes of global change. As the old social formations explicitly and relentlessly disintegrated, subjectivity reacted accordingly – introversion ensued. The remaining epistemological and ontological anchor was found in consciousness, the only center left for navigating through the fuzziness of the external world. In literature, introversion was most notable in the techniques of stream-of-consciousness, interior monologue, and multiple points-of-view. Realism could no longer be trusted to provide a sufficient literary expression – the very reality it had taken for granted was now in a state of permanent dissolution. The aesthetic reaction was fierce and swift: literature became experimental or innovative in form; its subject matter turned towards the fluidity of consciousness, hence the diminishing of the objective world; the reversal of plot structure; open-endedness in lieu of dénouement; the dissolution of the traditional narrative structure was redeemed by cyclical patterns, mythological archetypes; the omniscient narrator replaced by an unreliable one, ruining the linear flow of time, etc.

New Wave SF faced a similar crisis and, in turn, a similar reaction. The old hard SF projections had proven to be either blatantly false or simply misguided. As the public and artistic absorption of the meanings of inner space and entropy

demonstrated, the optimistic and technocratic world of space-faring and utopia-building had not come to pass; in fact, the rocket had turned out to be a nuclear warhead, and any utopia a totalitarian regime. Gernsbackian gadgets transformed into alienated objects, their usage into commodity consumption. Concepts such as progress, science, technology, liberty, etc., either became obsolete or underwent re-evaluation; strictly speaking, the world SF used as its treasure trove of big ideas and motifs was no longer a reliable source for its extrapolations. The past was a lingering memory and the future all the more uncertain; SF was literally at a crossroads: “This conviction, of standing at a break in history, after the disaster, in a new and unprecedented reality, is an important factor in Modernism” (Greenland, 1983). Indeed, the historical parallels are startling. SF writers all of a sudden resorted to aesthetic introversions of their modernist predecessors – the Campbellian omniscient narrator, the Heinleinian omnipotent engineer, and Clarkean space odyssey were supplanted by Dickian entropic subjects, and Ballardian surrealist landscapes. Contrary to some critics' assessment that New Wave was essentially art for art's sake, we can view its proliferation of style more in Bakhtinian terms, in that modernist aestheticism marked “the new centrality of dilemmas of perception and representation as such: dilemmas which foreground the status of language as such, but also the problematization of the Real [...]” (Jameson, 2007). However, both arguments are convincing, since there is no such thing as pure modernism, especially in the SF genre, and in many cases, similar to the entropy in vogue, at the time this literary reversion turned out to be introverted sensationalism.

As Asimov long ago proved with “The Caves of Steel” (1954) that SF can indeed be written as a detective story, even greater disturbances occurred in the 1960s and beyond. World-building is an obsessive and inherent trait of the genre, but more often than not an individual's, or rather a group's, relation to the projected world takes precedence as well. The dominant epistemological frames in Aldiss's, Ballard's, and Delany's fiction are juxtaposed with the ontological preoccupations; both types of questions posed above are pulsating between the background and the foreground. In Ballard's case, as we shall see, a literal fusion of subjectivity and objectivity is taking place, not to mention the later technological surrealisms of cyberpunk. New Wave dealt with the fluid urban landscape as well as inner space; thus it became modern, and its penchant for conferring historicity to the present continued unabashed. McHale (2003) notes that postmodernist fiction, just like any form of literature, resumes the inherent mimetic strivings: “[...] what postmodernist fiction imitates, the object of its mimesis, is the pluralistic and anarchistic ontological landscape of advanced industrial cultures - and not only in the United States”. By the 1960s SF had become well equipped for this anarchy. The rigid and linear narratives of the previous periods proved inadequate for a genre so structurally tethered to the present. Authors like Moorcock and Ballard explicitly announced that SF needed more interaction with non-genre fiction: “I was an admirer of Burroughs's use of modern imagery and idiom, for his metaphorical use of sf ideas, for his ear for the language and ironies of the drug underworld and of the streets” (Moorcock, 2004), and “[...] I feel that the surrealists have created a series of valid external landscapes, which have their direct correspondences within our own minds” (Ballard & MacBeth, 1970). The main source of attraction stems from the use of language and imagery, the very style non-genre authors used to convey similar, if not the same, ontological and epistemological concerns.

Burroughs's “Naked Lunch” (1959), and especially “The Nova Trilogy” (1961-64) was the kind of experimental fiction Moorcock was looking for as the next big step towards the modernization of SF. The aleatory cut-up technique, and extreme non-linearity, not to mention the constant use of SF tropes, represented a total break with tradition; Moorcock proclaimed Burroughs as the new Renaissance Man for New Wave (Greenland 1983). One could even say that before William Burroughs exploded onto the scene there was the age of Edgar Rice Burroughs, the age of “adventure” and “science”, the age of adolescent SF. Even though there is a barrage of sexual and SF imagery pervading his works, Burroughs's trilogy is primarily concerned with language as the primary antagonist: “Word is an organism [...] a separate organism attached to your nervous system on an air line of words [...] From symbiosis to parasitism is a short step. The word is now a virus [...] Modern man has lost the option of silence. Try halting your sub-vocal speech. Try to achieve even ten seconds of inner silence. You will encounter a resisting organism that forces you to talk. That organism is the word”. (Burroughs 2001)

The modern forces of control, ranging from the government to addictive substances, are metaphorically heightened and universalized as pure language, as a system of signs, or rather, as a ubiquitous web of semiosis, where oppressive identities and binary oppositions are begotten. This is where the cut-up technique comes along to resist language on its own terms: “Burroughs simply cuts and sews the garments randomly, keeping an eye out for the hidden patterns which begin to reveal themselves when the rationalist filters of everyday perception are removed” (Broderick, 2009). Overall, his whole project can be summarized as a metaphorical expression of New Wave SF – breaking away from the past, experimentation, the use and deconstruction of modern semiosis, and, most importantly, foregrounding the manner in which a story is conveyed. He is the embodiment of modern literary influence upon the genre, one of the immediate results of the open interaction between the literary realms that had been separated for far too long.

Thomas Pynchon, on the other hand, is proof of a silent interaction between the realms, or rather, how the modern world of science and technology forces both realms to talk of the same things, for his fiction “is about people in a world surrounded by the physical presence of science (technology) and holding a worldview frequently expressed in the language or metaphors of science” (Brigg, 2002). We shall see later that writers like him who are not strictly SF and not strictly mainstream, but partake of both territories, fall under the confusing title of slipstream. Since the publication of his

short story "Entropy" (1960) we can say his interests have been overlapping with those of SF, yet, similar to Burroughs, the tactics have been formal and postmodernist in nature. In the overwhelming "Gravity's Rainbow" (1973) the language of science permeates even the title of the novel – the destructive trajectory of the rocket coupled with the positive symbolism of a rainbow. It is a unique blend between actual science, fringe science, and pulp magazine SF, among many other discourses. While SF tends to literalize metaphors by resorting to the cognitive measures found in modern science, in the works of Burroughs and Pynchon a cliché like "falling apart at the seams" becomes literal, but on the formal, textual level; in fact, Gravity's character Slothrop is textually dispersed throughout the notorious, postmodernist Zone of the shattered post-WWII world, in which the "categories have been blurred badly" (Pynchon, 2000). The entropy of characters and the fictional world is literalized via the overt use of stream-of-consciousness and postmodernist devices, such as metafiction and genre hybridization. Similar to both Burroughs and the New Wavers, a repertory of SF images and ideas he provides later on bloom in cyberpunk territories. If Burroughs is the great herald of the open interaction between SF and non-genre territories, then Pynchon is proof that equal interests pervade both zones, and that the interaction via, for example, Moorcock's avant-garde project, was unnecessary. However, on the general level, the interaction had to resume, for the synchronicity between the zones was out of phase.

4.0. Conclusion

To illuminate the transitional tendencies of the Golden Age, some of the authors and works that are in general opposed to the ideology of the Golden Age and act as forerunners of the New Wave have were touched upon. Besides Kurt Vonnegut's metafictional parodies and satires, "The Sirens of Titan" being the prominent example of the genre turned on its head, there was a plethora of authors tackling then sensitive subjects in the genre. In Frederik Pohl and C.M. Kornbluth's "The Space Merchants", the fictional world dominated by advertisement agencies and hyper-consumerist ideology is an example of sociological world-building and, at the time, a serious demonstration of the critical capacity of the genre. Theodore Sturgeon's "More Than Human" is a drastic turnover of the theme on human evolution. Rather than focusing on superhuman powers à la A.E. van Vogt's "Slan", the novel considers the psychological and moral dilemmas of a group of evolved humans who feel and perceive as one being, as a gestalt mind. Many more such examples await in the piles of forgotten or ignored SF paperbacks of the 1950s, and New Wave resumed the challenges set forth by these abandoned works. Then, it was shown how New Wave brought the mobility to the genre, including thematic and stylistic innovations. Thematically, the period paid special attention to inner space, the psychological aspect of a normal human being in the decaying and swiftly changing 1960s. The emphasis was no longer on technological hardware, but on human "software". Stylistically, the period is rife with self-reflective and auto-telic practices of modernism and postmodernism. More than the subject matter on entropy, the techniques of metafiction, stream-of-consciousness, free indirect discourse, multiple points of view, etc., directly and finally connect the genre to mainstream literary influences.

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