

SCIENCE FICTION AND NARRATIVE FORM

Edited by David Roberts, Andrew Milner and Peter Murphy

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237

Academic engagement with science fiction remained steady from the 1970s until the turn of the millennium, a period that saw the publication of remarkable studies such as Darko Suvin's *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979), Kathleen Spencer's essay on the stylistic description of science fiction (1983) and Carl Freedman's *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (2000). In the twenty-first century, there has been a veritable explosion of texts, both from scholars and authors of science fiction. Whereas earlier critical works were more concerned with genre definitions, new contributions seek to explore the multiple possibilities of science fiction, and thus the panorama of science fiction studies is changing drastically and rapidly (see, for instance, Langer 2011; Ginway and Brown 2012; Lavender III 2014; Lothian 2018; Schalk 2018; Brown Spiers 2021). *Science Fiction and Narrative Form* is one more example of how science fiction seems to be receiving more attention from academic institutions now than any other moment in its history. In its opening paragraphs, co-author David Roberts declares that "like the epic and the novel, science fiction is a literary form" (1). Yet, it is hard to say whether placing science fiction "among the great narrative forms" (1) succeeds in pushing science fiction studies in new directions. At times it even feels as though it does the opposite, as the formalist approach seems to neglect some of the most outstanding literary tendencies within science fiction over the past two decades.

The book relies heavily on notions of literary form derived from Georg Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel*, originally published in book form in 1920. Despite not being one of his most widely cited works, the work contains ideas on literary forms that are not entirely without value, and the three authors of *Science Fiction and Narrative Form* make their case for approaching science fiction as narrative form in a very refined and comprehensive manner. According to Lukács, the epic is a pre-modern literary form and it transforms into the novel with the advent of modernity. The difference between the two is that the epic belongs in a world that is whole, self-contained, where meaning is integrated in that wholeness. The modern individual, in contrast, is alienated from the world, and so the novel constantly seeks, but fails, to retrieve wholeness and unity. As society develops, Lukács predicted, there will emerge "a new form of artistic creation" (1988: 152) to best suit the needs and ethos of that society. The premise of the authors in *Science Fiction and Narrative Form* is that science fiction fulfills that role prophesized by Lukács, of a narrative form capable of representing a complete world once again. Although they are not the first to make such a claim—Timothy Bewes argued something similar for the postmodern novel—the three authors do provide cogent arguments and close analyses to illustrate their point.

238

In Part 1, David Roberts traces the transition from the epic to the novel, and then from the novel to science fiction, the latter combining aspects of the former two. Science fiction resembles the epic in that the imagined worlds of science fiction (unlike in the novel) are self-contained totalities. But, like in the novel (and unlike in the epic), the meaning of that world is not immanent to reality—it seeks transcendence. In creating possible worlds, science fiction "poses at the same time the question of the meaning of its hypothetical experiment" (58). The technology-oriented, post-human societies that science fiction projects thus have predictive, allegorical and didactic value. In the second part, Andrew Milner taps into the potential of science fiction to construct future histories, following another of Lukács's incursions into literary theory, *The Historical Novel* (1937). In an innovative move, Milner severs the now commonplace association between science fiction and utopia in order to bring historical fiction to the equation: "the typical subject matter of SF is future history, uchronia and dyschronia rather than utopia and dystopia, its precursors therefore Scott and Dumas, rather than More and Francis Bacon" (97). To illustrate this claim, the author conducts close analyses of climate fiction texts set at progressively more distant points in the historical future. In Part 3, Peter Murphy focuses on epic form through an extensive discussion on epic science fiction, most notably exemplified by Isaac Asimov's Foundation series. Epic science fiction is capable of encompassing vast spaces and expanses of time, as big in scale as the imagination allows. Thanks to these formal possibilities, it reveals the full effects of historical/natural cyclic forces that transcend limited human

actions and motivations. The epic scale of science fiction thus offers a different perspective on social relations and the meaning (or lack thereof) of human life. Finally, Part 4, written by Milner again, follows up on the premise that science fiction relates closely to historical fiction. Current quasi-apocalyptic events such as wars, pandemics, climate change and AI raise the question of whether history will continue to advance at all, or if the end is indeed near. Science fiction, Milner argues, reflects on the questions posed by these present-day threats and provides possible answers.

While these arguments are intellectually compelling, they present severe limitations. The theoretical underpinnings of the book, as developed mostly in the introduction and Part 1, are not always easy to grasp, not least because the language used is often obscure. One wonders how relevant Lukács's theory of literary forms can be in current times. Despite its high level of abstraction, the book seems to take a very reductive approach to literature: the organic totality of the ancient Greeks vs the godless, sinful modern world; the epic vs the novel. In its simplicity, it sounds suspiciously like a grand narrative, with its concomitant problematic: a series of theories articulated at a specific historical moment from a Eurocentric perspective which are nevertheless taken as a universal explanation of what literature was and is supposed to be about. And it is not only that the notion of science fiction as literary form rests on these premises, but the theories about science fiction put forward in this book are themselves constructed following the same totalizing logic. That is, Lukács's arguably dated ideas are not merely a point of departure, but regulate and impinge on how science fiction theories are formulated throughout the book. An example of this impulse of generalized abstraction is the way the post-human is addressed. Roberts seems to take a transhuman stance when he says that "The transcendence of man reverses into the armoured body, the soldier into the killing machine [...] the worker into slave" (75). In the face of this predicament, it is science fiction's role to find (or not) humanity in the post-human. There is no mention of Donna Haraway's cyborg theory (1985), nor is there anything close to the post-anthropocentrism that Rosi Braidotti poses as the basis of post-human thought (2013). Roberts's analyses hinge on the anthropocentric fear of lost humanity, a humanity that recoils in self-doubt when confronted with the technological Other. Moreover, the works under study offer a disproportionately Euro-Western and male-centered version of the human and of science fiction. Aside from Mary Shelley, Margaret Atwood and very few other exceptions, all the writers given any significant space of discussion are men. The book thus follows the human-as-man in his teleological journey from epic to novel to science fiction. Murphy's exploration of Asimov's *Foundation*, for all its insistence that human volition and purpose are transcended in the epic, is largely underpinned by colonization, imperialism and a preoccupation with the "rise, fall

and rise of civilizations” (187). Finally, Milner’s contention that science fiction is about future history and/or apocalypse ignores how science fiction is, for many writers of color, much more about the past and the present than it is about the future, not least because postcolonial/decolonial societies have already experienced apocalypse in their histories, thus irremediably undoing Milner’s dichotomy (i.e. the either/or of history and apocalypse).

All in all, the authors set off on their quest to canonize science fiction as a serious literary form without taking into account any significant developments in the theories and practices of science fiction from the last four decades: the rise of gender and sexuality issues; the rapidly advancing area of co-futurisms, to which Afrofuturism, Indigenous futurism and Latinx science fiction (among others) belong; the emergence of post-genre fantasy and new forms such as the New Weird; non-anthropocentric accounts of posthumanism; the historical-materialist approach to the genre spearheaded by John Rieder (2017); among others. In its exploration of literary forms restricted to Lukács’s theories, the book is perhaps overly specific and targets a very narrow corpus, yet it presents its interpretations as universal tenets of science fiction. As far as argumentation and analysis goes, however, the book is very consistent with the aims it purports to fulfill and it does contain thought-provoking remarks, such as that in science fiction “the question transcends the answer” (44), or that, today, science fiction “has supplanted religion and prophecy” (194). Inasmuch as one can find a universalist notion of literary forms appealing and relevant, this book certainly makes some interesting points about the intersection between science fiction and narrative form.

240

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