ROGER LUCKHURST

Science Fiction
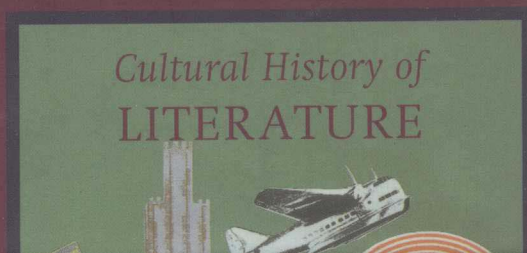
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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

The idea of a specifically cultural history has only emerged relatively recently. Advocates argue that it best combines the disciplinary strengths of writing history with the ferment of ideas associated with what might be loosely termed Critical Theory. In the 1980s, when the work of French thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan (amongst others) really began to permeate the humanities in Britain and America, controversies often polarized into History versus Theory. History stood in for Tradition and sound, empirical method. Theory took aim at History's unexamined 'metaphysical assumptions' and the complicity of the discipline with narratives of the nation-state. Some strands of Theory seemed to question the possibility of there being agents or subjects acting in history, and this prompted defenders of History to take up the cudgels to beat off these effete, anti-humanist Parisians with the view that History was the last redoubt of humane and civilized values. Once these first skirmishes were over, a more nuanced dialogue began. In 1989, Lynn Hunt edited *The New Cultural History*, in which several historians began to explore how the writing of history might change in the light of challenges to assumptions about kinds of historical source, the nature of texts and the implicit narrative structures used in historiography.[1] She continued this set of debates in another, co-authored, collection of essays, *Beyond the Cultural Turn*.[2] Mark Poster agreed that cultural history challenged the older social history by questioning narrative in History, but also by forcing it to deal with 'low' as well as 'high' cultural sources and, in a related way, to think harder about the way certain agents of history (for example the masses, women, colonized, marginal or subaltern peoples) had been erased or

rendered anonymous in history-writing.[3] Catherine Belsey defined cultural history as 'history at the level of the signifier', one which attends much more to the signifying practices of historical texts, the way they generate often unstable meanings and values, thus foregrounding the problems interpreting historical meaning from such textual traces.[4] The emphasis, initially, seemed to be on what history could learn from cultural and literary theory. In the 1990s, however, the wilder shores of theory and cultural studies became subject to a rehistoricization – to a renewed sense of the importance of situating texts in a variety of historically informed contexts. Approaches to texts have thus become markedly more interdisciplinary, situating the object of study within a network that might include historical, psychological, political, legal and other modes of knowledge. The fascination of Critical Theory with notions of subjectivity thus combines with a renewed insistence on the historicity of these processes. 'Cultural history', Mark Poster tells us, 'might then be understood as the study of the construction of the subject, the extent to which and the mechanisms through which individuals are attached to identities, [and] the shape and characteristics of those identities.'[5]

A cultural history of science fiction (SF) might start out from three issues raised by this account. First, it is worth saying that the very existence of such a genre history owes everything to the understanding of 'culture' in its broadest, anthropological sense as investing meaning in all forms of symbolic human practice. SF is typically regarded as a very low literary form, often completely ignored or edged to the margin of literary study or intellectual history as rather juvenile. Cultural history, however, tries not to prejudge its evidence, and thus finds itself open to the immensely rich resources that a genre like SF offers to anyone interested in key aspects of the culture and history of the West in the last 120 years. Viewed in this way, the genre offers its own kind of surrogate public history. Since Raymond Williams began to explore the shifting meanings of the notion of 'culture' itself, it has also become possible to write a history of how certain forms come to be judged as high or low, civilized or primitive, canonical or marginal.[6] The complaint of those who read and study popular genres is that they are always regarded as inferior because a singular, high cultural definition of aesthetic value is used to judge them. Exploring the historicity of that imposed value and shifting the premises of critical judgement is thus an essential part of this project.

Second, cultural history will situate SF texts in a broad network of contexts and disciplinary knowledges. Perhaps because the very name of the genre yokes together 'science' and 'fiction', two fields that have

been regarded as opposites for much of the twentieth century, this necessitates an ambitious stretch of contextual material, ranging from the history of science and technology, via the softer social sciences, to the rarefied world of aesthetic and critical theory. This will not, then, be a *literary* history as such, an exhaustive genre survey that visits every significant text for a brief outline, critical comment and perhaps summary judgement of relative worth. Instead, I want to investigate representative SF works from about 1880 to the present that are rich and overdetermined objects because they speak to the concerns of their specific moment in history. This is not to say that SF merely reflects its conditions of production; a cultural historical understanding reads 'the novel not just as passively marked with the imprint of history, but also as one of the ways in which history is made, and remade.'[7]

Third, I want to take seriously the idea that a cultural history of science fiction might contribute in a new and significant way to the history of the constitution of the modern subject. Like Mark Poster, Michael Steinberg has suggested cultural history aims 'to chart cultural constructions of identity and meaning through the formation of inhabited particularities defined autonomously from the nation-state: race, religion, and class and, more recently, gender and sexuality'.[8] Whilst I think SF texts might be (and have been) read for the ways in which they articulate and imaginatively reinvent these categories of identity, I want to suggest a slightly different focus. For me, SF is a literature of technologically saturated societies. A genre that can therefore emerge only relatively late in modernity, it is a popular literature that concerns the impact of Mechanism (to use the older term for technology) on cultural life and human subjectivity. Mechanized modernity begins to accelerate the speed of change and visibly transform the rhythms of everyday life. The different experience of time associated with modernity orients perceptions towards the future rather than the past or the cyclical sense of time ascribed to traditional societies.[9] SF texts imagine futures or parallel worlds premised on the perpetual change associated with modernity, often by extending or extrapolating aspects of Mechanism from the contemporary world. In doing so, SF texts capture the fleeting fantasies thrown up in the swirl of modernity.

Mechanism should not be understood as limited to the machine. When Thomas Carlyle wrote in 1829 about the onset of 'the Mechanical Age', he began a hugely influential discourse in which Mechanism was felt to pervade not only 'the external and physical . . . but the internal and spiritual also'. Mechanism, Carlyle argued, had

wrought 'a mighty change in our whole manner of existence' that had begun transforming everything from the public world of industry and politics to the very interior of the self.[10] Later in the nineteenth century, a new literary genre of 'scientific romance' began to centre plots on these transformations. However, the privileging of Mechanism by H. G. Wells and other writers in the *fin de siècle* was by then unlikely to receive much legitimacy, for the value of Culture had been defined in exact opposition to Machinery by Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). Culture's 'sweetness and light' and its 'inward working' on the spirit fought against 'that mechanical character which civilisation tends to take everywhere'. 'Faith in machinery is', Arnold warned, 'our besetting danger.' For redress, 'Culture looks beyond machinery, culture hates hatred; culture has but one great passion, the passion for sweetness and light.'[11] Mechanism began to accrue a whole range of metaphorical associations that constructed it as one of the opposites of civility and culture: Mechanism was industrial, harsh, inflexible, undifferentiated, exterior, superficial, vulgar, lowly, wrecking of spirit. In Britain, the 'mechanical arts' carried the resonance of the artisan, low on the social scale and even lower in the symbolic capital by which cultural value was discriminated.

It is precisely because High Culture largely turns away from treatments of Mechanism in this important Arnoldian definition that SF becomes such a valuable historical resource for investigating the cultural impact of this central aspect of modernity. The genre runs in parallel to a significant strand of philosophical and cultural discourse throughout the twentieth century that tries to get the measure of Mechanism, yet is constantly having to readjust its calibration. The sociologist Max Weber spoke about the 'disenchantment' of the world by the 'iron cage' of growing bureaucratic mechanisms that ordered and regulated increasing areas of modern existence. The philosopher Martin Heidegger warned of the danger that attended the way *'techne'* was reorganizing notions of truth and essence. Under the 'planetary imperialism of technologically organized man', Heidegger said in 1938, humanity risked forgetting its true Being.[12] Siegfried Giedion argued in *Mechanization Takes Command* that it was in the inter-war years (1918–39) that 'at one sweep, mechanization penetrates the intimate spheres of life' and 'impinged upon the very centre of the human psyche'.[13] Later commentators, like Jacques Ellul, argued that *technique* – a term that incorporated machines, automation, bureaucracy and the ever-encroaching armatures of the administered life – 'transforms everything it touches into a machine'. Man, under this regime,

would become merely 'a device for recording effects and results obtained by various techniques'.[14] A cultural history of SF needs to follow the modulations of this line of thought, reading texts against these concerns over the perceived creeping advance of Mechanism.

One of the elementary reasons for the high cultural suspicion of SF is surely that the genre can often seem to be an advocate of Mechanism, and therefore aligned with anti- or post-human forces. Within SF, technology is often an unproblematic positive force, serving as the principal (or only) determining agent for progress, even resulting in the ultimate transcendence of human limits – whether that means the physical limits of planet Earth or human biology, or the temporal limits of mundane time and mortality. In this version, SF can be a literature that celebrates the liberation promised by technology, a genre of sublime, superhuman, faster-than-light feats. More soberly, this vein can attempt a modern technological upgrade of the Utopia, an older high cultural tradition of writing to which some (but actually very little) generic SF can be allied. Equally, though, there is a significant strand of SF writing that regards the impacts of Mechanism as profoundly traumatic, and can produce accounts in which the human subject is pierced or wounded by invasive technologies that subvert, enslave or ultimately destroy. In this version, SF shades into horror or Gothic writing. The modern Gothic, another despised popular writing that has shadowed Enlightenment rationalism since the eighteenth century, is a genre that also, as Robert Miles comments, 'constitutes significant textual evidence for the writing of the history of the subject'.[15] The sense of trauma induced in the subject by modernity means that Gothic and SF writing are constantly in dialogue. It is no wonder that a number of SF historians concur with Brian Aldiss that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is the first SF text, and that the whole genre is 'characteristically cast in Gothic or post-Gothic mould'.[16]

At the extremes, then, Mechanism is an agent of progress and transcendence or an insidious weapon that cuts into and undermines the integrity of the human. Yet cultural history shows that these extremes are rarely encountered in the messy, experiential world – that *ambivalence* towards technologies is often the presiding spirit of engagement. And this is perhaps because, as recent work on the history and theory of technology insists, we need to think our way beyond the construction of Mechanism as somehow outside cultural life, transforming or threatening it from some exterior place. Bruno Latour argues that 'we are never confronted with science, technology and society' as somehow discrete and separated spaces, but rather

'with a gamut of weaker and stronger associations' that networks these elements together.[17] Andrew Feenberg agrees, calling in technology studies for 'a radical redefinition that crosses the usual line between artefacts and social relations'.[18] A cultural history of science fiction will situate texts, therefore, as part of a constantly shifting *network* that ties together science, technology, social history and cultural expression with different emphases at different times. SF will not conform to a particular literary typology or formalist definition: rather, it will be marked by sensitivity to the ways in which Mechanism is connected into different historical contexts.

Cultural history is somewhat different from other approaches to the genre. Ignored for much of its existence, early genre histories tended to be written by SF writers themselves or by enthusiasts. A hugely valuable resource, this form of history has nevertheless, as Brooks Landon suggests, 'been a largely anecdotal construct, frequently shaped to particular ends and infrequently contextualised in the larger culture'.[19] Scholarly writing on SF emerged later. Thomas Clareson and Edward Lauterbach set up an academic newsletter in 1959, attached to the organization of a symposium on SF at the annual conference of the American Modern Language Association (MLA). The first number of *Extrapolation* set out key aims, including the generation of 'accurate, cumulative bibliographies' and 'the need for a comprehensive history of the genre'.[20] The second issue reported astonishment that nearly ninety copies of the newsletter had been requested, and this edition included the first stab at a bibliography of articles on SF that ran to a mere five pages. From such small beginnings, the MLA symposium became a vital intellectual base for thinking conceptually about SF. At the December 1968 meeting, a large audience listened to Samuel Delany's linguistic analysis of SF, 'About Five Thousand One Hundred and Seventy Five Words', the first of his influential attempts to theorize the particular syntactical rules of the science-fictional sentence. *Extrapolation* also carried the transcript of the symposium 'Science Fiction: The New Mythology', during which the academic Darko Suvin proposed the definition of SF as a literature of 'cognitive estrangement'.[21] Delany and Suvin launched very different but influential models for the study of SF. Both, however, displaced genre history to a large extent because they were so concerned with formalist or narrowly conceptual definitions of SF.

Delany's substantial body of criticism and the critical work of followers like Damien Broderick have focused on the specific reading experience that takes place when reading genre SF. This suggests that

in reading we implicitly learn a language made up of conventions, of narrative formulae, plots, icons and shared images. Every new genre book or film is implicitly located inside this 'mega-text'. The pleasures of recognition and repetition can be explored with this theory; it also helps explain why new readers, or readers trained in the Realist mode that still dominates the novel form, can completely fail to understand a genre text.[22] This has been a valuable approach, but it is Suvin's definition that has dominated SF criticism since its first publication in essay form in 1972. This was largely because it became the conceptual framework for *Science Fiction Studies*, the journal Suvin co-founded in 1973. Suvin defined SF as a genre 'whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment'.[23] 'Cognitive estrangement' is the shorthand term that defines Suvin's stance: the reader enters an imaginative world different (estranged) in greater or lesser degree from the empirical world around the writer or reader, but different in a way that obeys rational causation or scientific law (it is estranged *cognitively*). Hence, an SF future is one that is meant to extrapolate rationally or scientifically from tendencies within the 'empirical environment'. This definition allowed Suvin a lucid way of defining SF against other popular genres. Fantasy, Gothic and the fairy tale all present worlds that are estranged, but the use of magic or the belief in malign, demonic influences are not 'cognitive'. Similarly, a detective might apparently work out a crime by cognitive logic, but does so usually in an unestranged fictional realm. This model rapidly orients the reader with a working conceptual hypothesis about the genre, and as such is incredibly useful. Suvin's definition is, however, a profoundly prescriptive and judgemental formulation that often berates SF works for failing to measure up. Books are policed for the rigour of their cognition: they must avoid tropes of the Gothic or Fantasy, which was termed a 'sub-literature of mystification'. Any trace of the fairy tale constituted 'creative suicide'. Even within SF, apparently, 80 per cent of books are 'debilitating confectionery' and Suvin warned that the genre must be rescued from the low intelligence of its average reader.[24] In another essay, Suvin dismissed considerably more than 80 per cent of SF under the categories of the 'banal', 'incoherent', 'dogmatic' or 'invalidated'.[25] Suvin's large output of essays over the years is typically marked by this tone of intemperate condemnation.

This impulse to purge might seem to be a problem resulting from over-precise terms of definition – too much insistence on the rigorous

science of science fiction. Carl Freedman, one of Suvin's followers, has tried to loosen things up a bit by suggesting that texts do not have to pass a test on the rigours of their scientific cognition. It is enough that a text exploits the 'cognition *effect*' – not some external measure of accuracy, but 'the attitude of the text itself to the kind of estrangements being performed'.[26] This means that a text might exploit the highly contested existence of telepathy, say, but would at least attempt to suggest its cognitive possibility or provide a rationale, rather than simply assuming the telepathic powers of an evil mesmeric genius, as a Gothic fiction might. Freedman assures readers that this does not affect the essence of Suvin's concept of 'cognitive estrangement'. But this doesn't change because Suvin is not using the term 'cognition' in a scientific or even in a particularly historical way. One of the paradoxes of Suvin's work is that whilst scholars owe him an immense debt for the archival work presented in *Victorian Science Fiction in the UK*,[27] an exhaustive attempt to collect hundreds of nineteenth-century fictions that might constitute a pre-history of the genre, he jumps into that archive using a rigid and ahistorical definition to divide up hundreds of fantasy, Gothic and scientific romances. There is little sense that the categories of popular literature and notions of what scientific cognition might be were both undergoing transformation in the nineteenth century, and that SF itself is the very product of this change. Suvin's definition of SF is not historical but political – cognitive estrangement arises from Suvin's particular take on Marxism. The aesthetics of estrangement were first articulated by the Russian Formalists but radicalized by the Marxist theatre of Bertolt Brecht (Suvin's other area of scholarly expertise). This, finally, is what drives Suvin's prescriptive judgements, since 'All durable or significant literature is . . . intrinsically non-capitalist', and any literary text that does not contribute to this project of de-mystification is to be discarded.[28] SF is to be a radical and politically estranging genre, then, even if this means we have to reject the majority of the contents of its history.

Suvin's definition has left a double legacy. On the one hand, his work contributed to the professionalization of the study of SF in the late 1960s. It is the preparedness to think with sophisticated critical paradigms about a popular form that is of immense value. On the other hand, his theory of SF essentially condemns much of the genre in a way that, although from a very different political perspective, is essentially continuous with high cultural disdain for popular culture. This baneful influence continues into the present: SF critics continue to act as judge and executioner for the genre. Carl Freedman's

Critical Theory and Science Fiction shares Suvin's political ambitions for SF and the same sense that a tiny sliver of texts has to be extracted from the mass in order to carry that project. For Freedman, only a few 'aesthetically and conceptually advanced novelists . . . break the semantic stranglehold of pulp over science fiction'.[29] Rather like Tom Moylan's work on utopianism within SF, this prescriptive political agenda contracts the genre to a chosen few texts, and has contempt for the majority of the field.[30] As Rob Latham has tartly observed, this is criticism that simply approves of texts that reflect back the 'reader-critic's cherished political dispositions'.[31]

In contrast, cultural historians, Catherine Belsey suggests, aim to explore how 'popular texts affirm norms and proprieties which we adopt, with whatever anxiety, or repudiate. Culture is lived as *a relation to* practice, as commitment or resistance, or as an uneasy relation between the two, an anxious, undecided ambivalence.'[32] Historians of SF need, in my view, to be less judgemental and prescriptive. We need to be just as interested in how fantasies about Mechanism can, for instance, prompt eugenic and proto-fascist scenarios in the 1910s and 1920s (fantasies that periodically return), or idolize a fundamentally anti-democratic Technocratic elite as a solution to the crisis of liberal democracies in the 1930s and 1940s. Cultural history needs to understand the appeal of breathlessly paced interstellar pulp fictions as much as the self-consciously Modernist prose adopted by counter-cultural SF in the 1960s. Genre histories have often been content to dismiss vast tracts of SF writing with broad-stroke condemnation. Brian Aldiss's *Billion Year Spree*, for example, is very typical of an English history in bemoaning the influence of American pulp magazines; the very coiner of the term 'science fiction' in the late 1920s, the magazine publisher Hugo Gernsback, is attacked for turning the genre into 'propaganda for the wares of the inventor'.[33] Edward James's excellent history, *Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, is slightly more qualified in its judgements, yet mostly concurs that the pulp fictions of the 1920s and 1930s 'may have bequeathed a largely unfortunate heritage to Sf in the second half of the twentieth century'.[34] Many of these judgements are driven by a need, understandable in the nascent years of the academic study of popular culture, to legitimate study of the genre to sceptical colleagues. The sense that SF has been ignored, ridiculed or undervalued contributes to the sense of wounded hurt often expressed by readers and writers on the genre, but it has also evidently motivated these repeated attempts to carve out a 'respectable' canon (whether chosen by aesthetic, national, political, formal

or other criteria) by dumping vitriol on the rest of the genre. It is time
we stopped doing this.

Whilst a cultural history might redress some of these problems in
SF criticism, I do want to acknowledge some of the limits of this
study. First, this is primarily a history of SF literature, even though
SF has become over the course of the twentieth century a very diverse
cultural mode. Besides a narrative literature, there are also identifi-
able film, TV, animation, poetry, music, role-playing and electronic
game, comic and graphic novel forms of the genre. The scientific
sublime fostered by SF has meshed with national space programmes
and military defence establishments and generated a host of new
religions. Postmodernists frequently suggested that the late twentieth
century was an increasingly science-fictional world. 'There are',
Thomas Disch has commented, 'fewer fields that have had so brief a
history in proportion to the extent of their cultural impact.'[35] Despite
all this evidence of the protean forms of SF, I have largely limited this
study to a conservative focus on literature, with some passing com-
ment on SF film and TV in the post-1945 era. Even worse, I have
limited the range to American and British SF almost exclusively – this
despite a long tradition of distinctive European traditions (particu-
larly in France, Germany and Portugal), Russian and Asian writing
in the genre. This bias reflects only the question of space and the
limits of my own competencies, rather than any hierarchical value
given to Anglo-American SF. In the British university context in which
I'm writing, comparative literary study is also a much weaker discip-
line than elsewhere, and this institutional factor has inevitably shaped
the kind of cultural historian I am. The only other excuse is to re-
mark that I was struck by the divergent national traditions of SF
writing even between Britain and America, meaning that the desire to
offer saturated historical contexts for the genre resulted in further
restrictions on the range of work I could cover.

The second limit is the lack of comment on one of the most distinc-
tive anthropological elements of SF culture: the dedicated fan-base
that has generated its own world of magazines, newssheets, samizdat
commentary, conventions and fan-fictions. This 'fandom' has had
elaborate networks of communication from the 1930s on, and scholars
are only just beginning to understand the interpenetration of amateur
and professional writing unique to the SF field. When I visited the
SF archive at the University of California Riverside, the curators were
just beginning the task of organizing the 190,000 fanzines that formed
the recently donated Bruce Pelz collection. Everyone was aghast at
the size of the task ahead, but they were already uncovering some

remarkable finds. The size of fan communities in contact has of course increased exponentially with the emergence of the internet (there is a fairly strong case to be made that the first computer-based electronic message boards in the 1970s, primitive inter-computer connections, were pioneered for the discussion of SF between fans).[36] Although the fan is commonly another source of contempt for SF (fans are stereotyped as arrested male adolescents with few social skills), there is an emerging ethnographic literature that makes fandom – as a complex creative, participatory engagement with mass culture – an important object of study.[37] This work will change again the kinds of cultural history written in the future.

I have already proposed that a historicist definition of SF necessarily produces a broader, more inclusive definition of SF than a formalist or conceptual one. SF emerged as a hybrid form in the nineteenth century and has remained one, interweaving with strands of Gothic, Realist, fantasy and utopian writing. The final limitation is an awareness that this book has relatively little to say about the adjacent genres of Gothic or fantasy – a big omission, given the large and varied nature of the interaction of science fictions with these forms. In part, this is a result of the focus on Mechanism. It is tempting to read both Gothic and fantasy dialectically for their very *absence* of concern with mechanized modernity. This is certainly how J. R. R. Tolkien defended fantasy, a genre that Tolkien stated, 'may, almost certainly does, proceed from a considered disgust for . . . the Robot Age'.[38] Tolkien supports a reading of fantasy for its symptomatic absences, but such a localized, historically specific and reactionary account cannot stand in for a complex genre that has many different kinds of engagement with modernity. Nevertheless, my relative lack of engagement with these adjacent genres should not be taken as a dismissal of these forms. I am in support of recent perspectives 'which view genre as a tendency within a text which will almost certainly also contain other generic tendencies'.[39]

What follows is a broadly chronological survey. Parts I and II aim to establish the very different origins of British and American writing about Mechanism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Part I), and to give a sense of the multiplicity of the different forms, styles and ideologies very quickly at work in the genre after it was fully established in the 1930s (Part II). The last four chapters are much more selective 'decade studies', experiments in trying to situate the distinctive movements within SF since 1960 in relation to broader cultural-historical contexts. In these chapters I have tried to show the contradictory directions SF could take, emphasizing the competing,