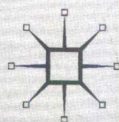




GLOBALIZATION, UTOPIA, AND POSTCOLONIAL SCIENCE FICTION

NEW MAPS OF HOPE

ERIC D. SMITH

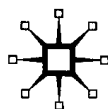


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New Maps of Hope

Eric D. Smith





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*For Alysse Mackenzie, who teaches me
about the future*

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Introduction: The Desire Called Postcolonial Science Fiction

In his 2007 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Díaz has his tragic protagonist, the son of Dominican immigrants living in New Jersey and an aspiring writer of science fiction (SF) and fantasy, pose an arresting analogy – startling in its frank, unqualified delivery – between the traditionally Euro-American genre of SF and the political and cultural realities of the Caribbean: “[Oscar] was a hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man, believed that that was the kind of story we were all living in. He’d ask: What more sci-fi than the Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?”¹ A wealth of political, cultural, and aesthetic claims is advanced in this peculiar juxtaposition. For how can the “underdeveloped” nations of the postcolonial Caribbean be said to recall in any reasonable sense the quicksilver lozenges, crystalline skyscapes, or, indeed, even the gutted, post-industrial, dystopian wastelands of canonical SF? The book that follows is, in short, an attempt to explore the conditions, both political and aesthetic, that make possible Díaz’s unqualified comparison of the seemingly incongruous and even incommensurable domains of the postcolonial third world and the genre of SF, particularly as expressed in the recent phenomenon of visionary SF narratives originating in these “marginal” national cultures.

The imperialist preoccupations of traditional SF have long been a topic of discussion,² and many scholars have recognized that, as John Rieder recently puts it, the period witnessing the “most fervid imperialist expansion” in the late nineteenth century coincides exactly with the rise of the genre.³ Following Edward Said’s famous claim that the novel as cultural artifact is quite literally unthinkable outside its proximate relation to imperialism, Rieder argues that SF must likewise be contextualized as a product of imperialist culture, finding its original

expression in late-nineteenth-century British and French fantasies of global conquest before emerging in the “new” imperialist cultures of Germany, Russia, the United States, and Japan in the twentieth century. Patricia Kerslake likewise contends that “[t]he theme of empire ... is so ingrained in SF that to discuss empire in SF is also to investigate the fundamental purposes and attributes of the genre itself.”⁴

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. therefore observes that canonical SF emerges from the juncture of three requisite conditions: the technological expansionism of the imperialist will to power; the intercession of a mediating popular culture at home to absorb and transcode the contingent trauma of the imperial project; and the pseudo-utopian imaginative projection of an “achieved technoscientific Empire.”⁵ Despite, however, this historical complicity with the encompassing and hegemonic “imaginary world-model of Empire,” Csicsery-Ronay holds that SF need not mechanistically replicate imperialist ideological structures. The genre may also, in its deployment of the globalizing models of Empire, provide the means for us to detect and decipher the ideological mystifications of global capital, the unique manifestations of globalization in particular national cultures, the emergence of technology as a cognitive mode of awareness, and the processes whereby individual national cultures exist alongside and engage the polymorphous *bad infinity* of the new global habitus. Likewise, Rieder contends that “while staying within the ideological and epistemological framework of the colonial discourse, [SF] exaggerates and exploits its internal divisions” such that the occlusions and occultations that subtend them are (however metaphorically or allegorically) rendered apparent and available for critique.⁶

SF’s unique generic tendency to replicate at the level of form as well as content the constitutive contradictions of empire and imperialist culture (including its more recent phase of globalization) may therefore reveal a deep structural affinity with the discourses of critical theory, specifically the latter’s deployment of the dialectic. Appealing to Darko Suvin’s now indispensable Brechtian definition of SF as the literature of “cognitive estrangement,” Carl Freedman advances the provocative claim that SF and critical theory may in fact be read as “versions” of one another in their structural predisposition for dialectical formulation, for exposing the apparently unassailable whole as an uneasy unity of antagonistic forces or tendencies (and vice versa). The genre of SF, Freedman notes,

is determined by the *dialectic* between estrangement and cognition. The first term refers to the creation of an alternative fictional world

that, by refusing to take our mundane environment for granted, implicitly or explicitly performs an estranging critical interrogation of the latter. But the *critical* character of the interrogation is guaranteed by the operation of cognition, which enables the science-fictional text to account rationally for its imagined world and for the connections as well as the disconnections of the latter to our own empirical world.⁷

For Suvin, the sustainment of this foundational dialectic is crucial for our understanding of how an SF text *works* as well as for the classification of exemplary SF narratives. An overbalancing or neutralizing of this dialectical tension in favor of cognition results in the mundane familiarities of an aesthetic “realism,” while one in favor of a mere estrangement not cognitively tethered to the present (and thus not critically charged) yields the irrationalist projections of purely generic “fantasy.” However, Suvin’s categories should not, Freedman cautions, be taken as objective criteria by which one may submit a given text to a merely superficial valuation. Rather, he suggests, we should consider the “attitude of the text itself to the kind of estrangement being performed.”⁸

Freedman’s primary contribution to Suvin’s influential model of SF is thus the unbinding of the form from the constrictively empirical categories of routine generic classification. We must learn to rethink genre, he offers, as a tendency (perhaps only one among several simultaneous, conflicting tendencies) active within the text rather than as a categorical master-list of cosmetic features by which one always provisionally assigns a work to the most appropriate taxonomic grouping: fantasy, science fiction, realism, modernism, novel, epic, and so forth.⁹ In this way, Freedman also provides a useful corrective to Suvin’s notorious dismissal of generic fantasy as “just a subliterature of mystification.”¹⁰ Positing genre as a kind of cognition and form as already a kind of content, Freedman’s dialectically tendential theory of generic classification privileges genre as “a more fundamental category than literature itself.”¹¹ So while genre may be understood as “a substantive property of discourse and its context,” the *literary* is simply the functional designation of a “formally arbitrary and socially determinate category,” the constitution of which can be traced to the thoroughly ideological practices of canon formation and hegemonic culturalization.¹²

As Freedman demonstrates through a close stylistic analysis of Philip K. Dick (whom Fredric Jameson famously nominates the “Shakespeare of science fiction”), the typical academic disregard for the genre, based traditionally on its presumed stylistic infelicities or inferiorities,

ultimately reveals an enduring bourgeois “celebration of personal subjectivity” and its canonical array of technical virtuosités as well as a deep aversion both to SF’s inherently *public* orientation and to its fundamental dialecticism, qualities which Freedman productively identifies with the Bakhtinian dialogic principle and the latter’s criticism of literary formalist interpretive practice as “precritical” discourse.¹³ The overriding formal tendency of SF, by contrast,

is above all critical and dialectical; its “prosaic” quality may signal substantive, as opposed to merely technical, complexity. Indeed, the entire category of the dialogic in Bakhtin’s sense is in the end nothing other than the (primarily Marxian) dialectic as manifest in literary (and linguistic) form.¹⁴

Freedman can, therefore, justifiably make the somewhat surprising claim that, inasmuch as SF maintains a unique structural fidelity to critical dialecticism and a historicizing, demystifying commitment to the embattled Marxian concept of totality, Marx himself may be read as “a theorist of science fiction *avant la lettre*” and SF as the privileged literary expression of critical theory.¹⁵ For just as Jameson suggests of dialectical thought more generally, SF undertakes the imaginative linking together of two or more “incommensurable realities” (subject and object, spirit and matter, self and world, and so forth) so that “for a fleeting instant we might catch a glimpse of a unified world, of a universe in which discontinuous realities are nonetheless implicated with each other and intertwined, no matter how remote they may at first have seemed.”¹⁶ Imbued then with what we might call a *dialectical intelligence*, SF takes as its point of departure not the monadic and discrete but rather the point at which the identical and non-identical have yet to abstract themselves from this fundamental, mutual interpenetration and/or antagonism. SF, like the dialectic, is thus “comparative in its very structure, even in its consideration of individual, isolated types.”¹⁷ Born in the imperialist collision of cultural identities and taking as its formal and thematic substance the spatial dislocations that inhere in the imperial situation, science fiction would seem the ideal instrument with which to engage critically the transition from the postcolonial condition to that of globalization.

However, despite both Freedman’s claims for the inherently critical tendencies of SF and Darko Suvin’s now widely held assertion that the estranging function of the genre provides the utopian means to “re-describe the known world and open up new possibilities of intervening

into it,"¹⁸ the disproportionate bulk of science fiction continues to be both produced and consumed, much as it has always been, in European and American imperial centers. The overwhelming impression left by this global disparity in the production of speculative narrative, Csicsery-Ronay observes, is that "only the technohistorical center will have a future."¹⁹ It remains as yet uncertain, he argues, whether "writers and readers of the less central nations" will choose (or even be able) to appropriate the estranging devices of SF – perhaps themselves "precisely the tools of hegemony" – to imagine the alternative social horizons that Suvin, Freedman, Jameson, and others celebrate.²⁰ Thus, Csicsery-Ronay finds that, in full accord with globalization theory's (perhaps premature) diminishment of the nation-state, the genre's propensity for imagining denationalization and elaborating fantasies of "global management" are less the result of emancipatory political anticipation or logical extrapolation than they are allegorized projections of "the political perspective of the dominant technopowers, for whom national cultural identity represents an obstacle to political-economic rationalization, the foundation upon which their hegemony is based."²¹

The first decade of the new millennium in particular has witnessed, however, the phenomenal efflorescence of narratives written within a speculative framework that radically reconfigure the conceptual machinery of SF and utopia to address the exigencies of postcoloniality and globalization in a way that challenges the hegemonic order to which Csicsery-Ronay refers. Beginning with Salman Rushdie's underappreciated 1975 debut novel, the genre's organizing engagement with globalization arguably reached formal consolidation with the 2004 publication of *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction*, a collection of short fiction edited by expatriate Caribbean SF writer Nalo Hopkinson and postcolonial scholar Uppinder Mehan. From the Caribbean steampunk of the Grenada-born Tobias Buckell and the South African cyberpunk of Lauren Beukes to the host of African and Southeast Asian writers of speculative fiction, these national cultures, consigned to the absolute past of first-world post-industrial progress, are increasingly exploiting the critical and utopian resources of the genre of the future to re-imagine and redefine their place in an uncertain present. As Hopkinson puts it in the introduction to *So Long Been Dreaming*, writers of postcolonial science fiction appropriate "the meme of colonizing the natives and, from the experience of the colonizee, critique it, pervert it, fuck with it, with irony, with anger, with humour, and also, with love and respect for the genre of science fiction that makes it possible to think about new ways of doing things."²² And as Irish SF writer

Ian McDonald reminds us, "The future comes to Kenya or Kolkata as surely as it comes to Kansas."²³

Perhaps more consequential, however, than the arrival of *the future*, whatever that concept may now mean, in the Kenyas and Kolkatas of the world (a formulation that merely replicates the rhetoric of developmentalism it seems designed to contest) are the array of futures emanating *from* these sites of production. Indeed, I argue that it is only in the recognition of what I want to call postcolonial SF's "new maps of hope" that we may ultimately justify recent claims to science fiction's status as a properly *historical* genre. As the account goes, in one of the more fascinating moments of juncture and transition in all of literary history, the decline of the great historical novel of Walter Scott coincides almost exactly with the emergence of narrative science fiction. Only four years after the publication of *Waverley* in 1814, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* marks the publication of what some claim as the first science fiction novel or, as Freedman argues, at least "the first work in which the science-fictional tendency reaches a certain level of self-consciousness, thus enabling a line of fiction that, at least in retrospect, can be construed as the early history of science fiction proper."²⁴ For Freedman, *Frankenstein* is particularly noteworthy as a threshold text in that it also formally embodies this moment of historical and generic transition. The reader, for instance, initially identifies Captain Walton, the typical "hero of an old fashioned travel narrative" and author of the letters that compose the novel's opening pages, as the book's protagonist.²⁵ What appears to be Walton's arctic travel narrative is disrupted, however, with the sudden appearance of Viktor Frankenstein, "the properly science-fictional hero, whose emergence as protagonist transforms the narrative into a predominantly science-fictional one."²⁶ This narrative displacement marks the exhaustion of the estranging function of the travel narrative or quest romance in the moment of bourgeois modernity. Exotic locales, made commonplace in the nineteenth century by the omnivorous cultures of imperialism, are no longer alien enough to induce a truly dialectical experience of identity and difference, so that the foreclosure of spatial dislocation as an estranging mechanism is accompanied by the near-immediate ascendance of the temporal.

This formal displacement can occur, as the work of H.G. Wells most readily demonstrates, in either of two directions, the past or the future. In either case, the achievement of imaginative distance from the present allows for its critical historicization, and it is precisely this estranging function that is central to Lukács' privileging of historical realism. The ruptural event of capitalism, as Jameson points out, requires a

new, *progressive* relationship to time than that of previous social and political formations like those of tribal or feudal systems or even of the ancient city-state: "it demands a *memory* of qualitative social change, a concrete vision of the past which we may find completed by that far more abstract and empty conception of some future terminus which we sometimes call progress."²⁷ Positioned as he is amid the fraught interstices of a rapidly transitioning world, "between two modes of production, the commercial activity of the Lowlands and the archaic, virtually tribal system of the surviving Highlanders," Scott is uniquely positioned to imagine into being a genuinely historical consciousness by constructing the present as the telos of a determinate past that has been successfully superseded.²⁸ Equally central to Lukács' account of the historical novel, however, is the gradual decline of the form, its faltering ability to fix its critical gaze on the present due to formally inherent tendencies toward escapist nostalgia and technical complexity. Thus, the post-1848 arrival of Flaubert and proto-modernism signals for Lukács the exhaustion of the historical novel as a vital form and the beginning of its swift descent into the aesthetic decadence and bourgeois ahistoricism of high modernism on the one hand and the stoic resignations of literary naturalism on the other.

Jameson likewise observes that the devitalization of Lukács' historical novel is coterminous with the rise of SF, which he marks not with the publication of *Frankenstein* but with the early novels of Jules Verne. Narrative SF continues the estranging work of the historical novel albeit, Jameson argues, in the opposite temporal direction:

We are therefore entitled to complete Lukács' account of the historical novel with the counter-panel of its opposite number, the emergence of the new genre of SF as a form which now registers some nascent sense of the future, and does so in the space on which a sense of the past had once been inscribed.²⁹

With the site of its temporal estrangement located in the space of the future, the genre of SF at once avoids the alluring encumbrances of nostalgia that compromised the historicizing force of the historical novel and assumes a definitively utopian vocation through its inevitable failure to imagine a radical future that is not simply a protraction (or what Rushdie, as we shall see, might call an "anagrammatical" reconfiguration) of the present in which it is written. For Jameson, this *necessary* failure constitutes the most important pedagogical function of the utopian genre, one that has re-emerged in our world of "post-" inflections

and global finance as a “sub-variety of SF in general” and, I suggest, of third-world SF in particular.³⁰

Such productive failure Jameson associates with the comprehensive and ongoing project of aesthetic modernism itself. Contrary to Lukács, who views the modernist aesthetic as fundamentally dehistoricizing, Jameson seeks to restore to our understanding of modernism a political imperative that the ideological solidifications of “late modernism” and New Critical formalism actively obscured or reterritorialized. Characterized by a Lukácsian aspiration to totality and enacting a “Utopian metamorphosis of forms” that resists tendencies of formal reification, aesthetic modernism produces works that increasingly defy traditional classifications “at the same time that they invent various mythic and ideological claims for some unique formal status which has no social recognition or acknowledgment,” thereby establishing what Jameson (like Alain Badiou) terms “the void” that necessitates modernism’s characteristic auto-referentiality, or its reflection on the conditions (and limitations) of its own production.³¹ Having redefined modernism as a utopian project that “re-emerges over and over again with the various national situations as a specific and unique national-literary task or imperative,” Jameson declares the need for “a wholesale displacement of the thematics of modernity by the desire called Utopia.”³² Aligning the ongoing global project of aesthetic modernism with the generic preoccupations of SF (and anticipating his subsequent book on the subject), Jameson concludes *A Singular Modernity* (2002) with the strident assertion that “[o]ntologies of the present demand archaeologies of the future, not forecasts of the past.”³³

In a perspicacious assessment of the extended treatment of SF offered in Jameson’s subsequent *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), Phillip E. Wegner claims that one of the book’s most “original contributions is that it enables us to understand science fiction itself as a *modernist* practice.”³⁴ Following Jameson’s endorsement of Suvinian cognitive estrangement as a way of grasping “the formal specificity of science fiction” as critical and utopian praxis, Wegner adds that one of the genre’s unique characteristics is its ability to realize the dialectical convergence of two seemingly antipodal, if not irreconcilable aesthetic forms: realism and modernism.³⁵ While works of classic modernism achieve their estranging effect through manipulations and distortions of formal and linguistic norms, SF does so precisely “through its ‘realistic’ content, a realism whose referent ... is an ‘absent’ one.”³⁶ Thus, SF might be said to achieve a paradoxical “realist (cognitive) modernism (estrangement)” capable of overcoming the formal contradiction in which the historical

novel of Scott eventually becomes mired – and able, therefore, to fulfill the latter's critical and imaginative vocation for a new epoch.

The study that follows argues that the recent surge of SF production from the marginalized sites of third-world national cultures may be read as a continuation and enduring validation of this unfinished modernist/utopian project. An objection might be raised at this point, however, to the assertion that the fantastical estranging devices of SF are singularly or, at the very least, especially equipped to address the desperate realities and historical paradoxes of contemporary postcoloniality. For what of that celebrated genre of magical or marvelous realism and its formal propensity for the ludic transformation of the material and the mundane, its willful disregard for the western dogma of an inevitable, implacable History, and its liberation of the powers of perception and the imagination from the linear, binary strictures of European cognitive and aesthetic modes? Díaz provides us a clue with Oscar Wao's assertion that Santo Domingo, the wider Caribbean, and, by implication, the third world itself now inhabit a science-fictional narrative. In fact, Oscar's query – "What more sci-fi than the Santo Domingo" – rehearses almost exactly the final rhetorical flourish of Alejo Carpentier's apologia for the aesthetic practice of the *real-maravilloso* in his majestic 1949 prologue to *The Kingdom of This World*: "After all, what is the entire history of America if not a chronicle of the marvelous real?"³⁷ Announcing (somewhat belatedly) his break from the aesthetic practice of Surrealism, Carpentier's prologue assumes, for all its sharp economy, the function and gravitas of a manifesto in its programmatic and passionate declarations, not least of which involve the distinction between the imaginatively impoverished and thoroughly reified legerdemain of European Surrealists and the utopian vitalism of an authentic, American marvelous realism, the conditions for which he discerns as if for the first time on a 1943 visit to Haiti:

After having felt the undeniable spell of the lands of Haiti. . . , I was moved to set this recently experienced marvelous reality beside the tiresome pretension of creating the marvelous that has characterized certain European literatures over the past thirty years. The marvelous, sought in the old clichés of the Broceliande jungle, the Knights of the Round Table, Merlin the sorcerer and the Arthurian legend. The marvelous, inadequately evoked by the roles and deformities of festival characters ...³⁸

Carpentier suggests that formulaic attempts to force the arousal of the marvelous or to counterfeit its wildly protean powers within a sclerotic

European imaginary, whose structural integrity consists of an absolute disavowal of precisely the “alternative” realities of sites like Haiti (and their deep interdependencies), reduces the thaumaturge to the legalistic bureaucrat and visionary creation itself to mere technical or instrumental proficiency. He traces here a process of aesthetic reification comparable to Jameson’s description of the hardening of an authentic modernist praxis into the ideological institution of late modernism. The marvelous, above all a kind of critical perception and ethico-political consistency, cannot be apprehended or fully even comprehended without the *a priori* commitment to it, which, in the face of all evidence to the contrary, perceives in the baleful and banal poverty of the present its immediate and utter transfiguration. Appropriating the tactic of Baudelairean shock, Carpentier writes,

There are still too many “adolescents who find pleasure in raping the fresh cadavers of beautiful, dead women” (Lautreamont), who do not take into account that it would be more marvelous to ravish them alive. The problem here is that many of them disguise themselves cheaply as magicians, forgetting that the marvelous begins to be unmistakably marvelous when it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality (the miracle), from a privileged revelation of reality, an unaccustomed insight that is singularly favored by the unexpected richness of reality or an amplification of the scale and categories of reality, perceived with particular intensity by virtue of an exaltation of the spirit that leads it to a kind of extreme state.³⁹

This imaginative alteration or critical intensification of our experience of the present, the enfeebling limits of which are thereby exposed as such, obviously has much in common with both the critique of ideology and the utopian project outlined above. Indeed, a consideration of Jameson’s own tentative periodization of magical realism offers us a way to understand this essential linkage between the rhetorical question posed by Carpentier at one historical/aesthetic juncture and its deliberate re-authoring by Díaz at another. In his brief analysis of magical realist cinema, Jameson offers the

very provisional hypothesis that the possibility of magic realism as a formal mode is constitutively dependent on a type of historical raw material in which disjunction is structurally present; or, to generalize the hypothesis more starkly, magic realism depends on a content