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Authorities, Canons, and Scholarship: the Role of Academic Journals

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Chapter 9

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Scholarly journals such as *Science Fiction Studies*, *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*, and *Extrapolation* which specialize in publishing academic criticism on science fiction are sometimes described as wielding a certain "authority" in the field. But how can such authority be defined? If it does exist, where does it come from? Over what or whom do they supposedly exercise it? And how does their perceived authority influence the canonization of certain science fiction texts instead of others?

It might be claimed that any notion of "authority" automatically implies both an established hierarchy and the ownership of a certain power due to one's standing within that hierarchy. As managing editor of a scholarly journal, I willingly concede the first of these two implications. A piece of sf criticism published, for example, in one of the above-named scholarly journals is probably more likely to be "authoritative" (i.e., accurate and trustworthy) than if it were to appear in *People* magazine or *Better Homes and Gardens*. But I have substantial doubts about the second. Exactly what "power" do academic journals like *Science Fiction Studies*, *Foundation*, and *Extrapolation* really possess? Let us examine the facts. First, we serve a very small and very specialized sector of readers and literary scholars—so we do not exert any appreciable influence over sf fandom or public opinion in general. Second, we are not normally considered to be among those venerable, "prestigious" academic journals with tens of thousands of subscribers—so our influence on university officials in important matters such as tenure decisions and academic promotions is undoubtedly quite modest. And third, our financial status as nonprofit scholarly publications ranks us among the very poorest in the publishing industry—so we do not have any measurable economic power that might be used to sway contemporary publishing practices.

To further illustrate this point, let me briefly explain how our editorial procedures work at *SFS*. First, a manuscript is received by any one of our five editors. That editor acknowledges receipt of it with an e-mail message, letter, or postcard to the author and then distributes a copy of the essay to the other four.

After the essay has been read by all five editors, and if the majority of us feel it to be original, interesting, and appropriate for *SFS*, then one of the editors is assigned as editor-in-charge of the submission. At this point, the editor-in-charge can return the essay to the author and ask for revisions before sending it out to readers, or can choose to forward it straightaway to at least two of our *SFS* editorial consultants for a more thorough evaluation. Our readers can recommend to accept the essay as written (or with minor revisions), to reconsider it again only after major revisions, or to reject it outright. Whenever a manuscript is provisionally accepted but with revisions required (almost always the case), the editor-in-charge acts as intermediary between the author and the consultants to eventually bring the manuscript to its final form as page-proofs. This process could take from 2 to 3 months or 15 to 18 months or more, depending upon the revisions needed and the expeditiousness of the contributing author. It is only when this end-point in the editorial process has been reached—when the article is deemed acceptable by all parties involved—that it is officially accepted for publication in *SFS*. A contract is then issued to the author and the article is placed among those "To Be Published" in a forthcoming issue.

If we as editors discern among such "To Be Published" articles certain possibilities of mixing and matching—that is, grouping together those which happen to target the same author, theme, or theoretical perspective, or perhaps juxtaposing certain essays which seem to act as point-counterpoint to each other—we often take advantage of such serendipitous occasions by lumping them together into the same issue, even if they were not originally scheduled to appear there. This particular authority we reserve to ourselves as editors—a kind of editorial privilege. But at no time do the *SFS* editors themselves enjoy special authorial privileges for the publication of their own research (whenever we find time to do it). Their own essays must follow the same editorial procedures as all others. In fact, more than once during the past few years, papers submitted by our own editors for publication in *SFS* have been either rejected or sent back for substantial modification.

Thus, our editorial philosophy in this matter is quite simple and straightforward: we want the sf scholarship that we publish to be the best it can possibly be. Accordingly, we encourage our contributors to accept a large measure of outside collaboration in order to improve their original submissions. We ask them to understand that this (sometimes lengthy) editorial process is an important part of publishing in a refereed journal and that it is an essential ingredient to ensure a quality product. And we urge our contributors to work with us toward this goal. Looking back over the years, I must say that *SFS* has been extremely fortunate not only because of those many sf scholars who have chosen to become affiliated with the journal and continue to volunteer their time and expertise, but also because of the large number of contributors who have indicated to us that they value this unique opportunity to revise and fine-tune their work before publication (and who are patient enough to see it through until the end).

But scholarly sf journals like ours feature more than just critical articles on science fiction: they also contain book reviews (which, at *SFS*, are restricted to

monographs, bibliographies, encyclopedias, and other works of sf criticism). By their very nature, book reviews tend to be inherently authoritative. They render judgments of worth on a newly published title and advise the reader of its relative merit compared with other similar books in the field—that is, they establish a kind of hierarchy. Further, in contrast to critical articles, book reviews ostensibly have the potential to wield considerable economic power in the sf marketplace by encouraging the purchase of certain texts and discouraging the purchase of others. Publishing such reviews, of course, is one of the major functions of any scholarly journal. But, as with the editorial procedures used for critical articles, those books about science fiction received for review at *SFS* (when the publishers choose to send us a copy for review purposes) are promptly passed along by our book-reviews editor Rob Latham to scholars in the field who have a recognized expertise in that particular area or discipline; only *they* have the "authority" to judge its contents. Once again, the journal itself serves only as the mouthpiece through which such views are expressed—whether they be positive, negative, or neutral.

Finally, it is sometimes argued that, because of their ability to bring into the limelight certain authors or subjects through their publication of "special issues," scholarly sf journals tend to manipulate and ultimately predetermine who and/or what becomes part of the science fiction canon. This may be true, but only partly so. There are a great many other factors involved—such as the self-regulating (and often ideological) mechanisms of the college curriculum itself, the easy availability of certain sf titles, the near impossibility of finding others that suddenly go out-of-print, and so on—over which academic journals such as ours have no control. It is true that we do provide a venue for sf scholarship devoted to the study (and teaching) of a reasonably wide variety of sf authors and texts, and their appearance in our pages may well be viewed by certain literature professors as a prerequisite support-structure for including such fictional titles in their course syllabi in the first place. However, as mentioned earlier, the amount and nature of this critical scholarship is strictly a function of our contributors and what they choose to send to us, and what *SFS* designates as a "special issue" is, in most instances, one where we happen to receive several articles on the same topic or author and subsequently decide to present them together in the same issue. A few recent cases of such coincidental convergence, for example, include our special issue "On *Star Trek*" (Vol. 24, No. 72, July 1997) or, to a somewhat lesser extent, the March 1999 issue of *SFS* (Vol. 26, No. 77) which contains a number of essays and a book review collectively titled "On Science Fiction and Queer Theory."

But there are times when we do announce a "special issue" without such presubmitted manuscripts in hand, and then solicit material for it. On these occasions, one editor (or one of our editorial consultants) usually makes an initial suggestion, the editors discuss its merits and, if they agree, he or she is given responsibility to gather together a number of submissions, send them out for review, help to edit them, arrange them in a series, and write a brief introduction for them. In the past few years, for example, Veronica Hollinger organized just such a special issue focusing on "Science Fiction by Women" (Vol. 17, No. 51, July 1990), Istvan

Csicsery-Ronay Jr. on "Science Fiction and Postmodernism" (Vol. 18, No. 55, November 1991), David N. Samuelson on "Hard Science Fiction" (Vol. 20, No. 60, July 1993), and Gary Westfahl on "A History of Science Fiction Criticism" (Vol. 26, No. 78, July 1999). More recently, our entire *SFS* editorial staff organized an ambitious two-volume special-issue series on "Global Science Fiction" (Vols. 26-27, Nos. 79-80, November 1999 and March 2000). For these issues, the assigned editor(s) had not only the authority to select the best articles for inclusion, but also the responsibility to oversee their individual quality and appropriateness.

The net effect of such special issues—both the coincidental ones and calculated ones—on the academic sf canon is difficult to ascertain. But, to the extent that such issues tend to focus more critical attention (i.e., give more publicity) to certain sf authors and works, and to the extent that teachers of science fiction might be more inclined as a result to include these authors and works in their courses, such special issues may indeed have some (albeit modest) influence on the canonization process.

In an attempt to be more proactive in this matter, *SFS* conducted a survey in 1993 on the then-current state of the sf canon, and published its results in November 1993 (Vol. 20, No. 61). In this survey, we asked a few dozen of our sf consultants and friends to identify what they felt to be the five or ten most "Unjustly Neglected Works of Science Fiction." Our rationale for doing so was clearly explained in our cover letter where we stated:

> We have two goals in mind: 1) lists like this are entertaining in their own right; 2) we are conscious that *SFS* has concentrated on a sort of canon that has influenced other readers of *SFS*, and has led to a kind of self-reinforcing list of Great SF Works. We believe one good way to get out of our canonical rut is to alert SF critics to the sorts of texts we would be especially interested in. . . . (422)

The results of this survey listed the following authors as "unjustly neglected" by sf criticism (in order of frequency cited): Cordwainer Smith, Poul Anderson, Joanna Russ, Brian W. Aldiss, Samuel R. Delany, Robert Silverberg, Theodore Sturgeon, the Strugatsky brothers, Alfred Bester, Carol Emshwiller, William Tenn, R. A. Lafferty, Robert Sheckley, A. E. van Vogt, Clifford D. Simak, David R. Bunch, and Bernard Wolfe, among others. We at *SFS* naturally assumed that this information would be very useful, and that it would hopefully motivate potential contributors to devote some critical attention to these heretofore unsung sf writers and works. But we were to be disappointed in this regard. During the years following the appearance of this survey, *SFS* continued to receive very few manuscripts on these particular authors—in spite of our clear indications that we were eager to publish such essays. Although it may be too soon to say definitively (after all, serious scholarship on "undiscovered" authors requires a certain amount of time), these efforts by *SFS* to expand the academic sf canon by direct intervention have, at least to date, borne no fruit. So what is the moral of this story? One might be tempted to conclude that such a lack of response says a great deal about the supposed "authority" held by scholarly journals over the academic sf canon. But time will tell. In either event, I firmly believe that the publication of a single classroom sf

anthology like *The Norton Book of Science Fiction* invariably exerts a greater and longer-lasting influence on the academic sf canon than the learned criticism of all scholarly sf journals combined.

A few years ago, *SFS* implemented yet another strategy to attempt to influence the existing sf canon, with results published in the November 1996 issue (Vol. 23, No. 70) titled "Science Fiction in Academe." We conducted an up-to-date survey of those sf courses being taught in North American colleges and universities. By publishing the findings of our broad-based poll—including actual course syllabi, bibliographies, and details of teaching methodologies—we hoped that our readers who regularly teach science fiction in their classes would have the opportunity to learn from their counterparts, and perhaps expand their own sf repertoire. We also sought to provide some concrete data to help clarify which authors and works seemed to be part of the contemporary sf canon, which are not, and why. Much like our earlier efforts, however, this attempt to directly influence the academic sf canon appears to have failed. But perhaps its effect cannot be truly measured until another, similar survey is conducted one day in the future and the results compared.

Insofar as serving as "spokespersons for the field," I am sure that my editorial colleagues will agree with me when I state categorically that it is *not* something scholarly sf journals relish doing. How can any editor of an academic journal "represent" science fiction as a whole? And yet, in the commercial and expediency-oriented world of the media industry, we are sometimes asked (usually by telephone) to provide a 25-words-or-less extemporaneous summary of what science fiction (usually referred to by our interviewers as "sci-fi") is all about, why it is important, and where it seems to be heading. In other words, as managing editors of sf journals, we are singled out as some sort of "authority" on the subject—an honor that is not only dubious but also wholly undeserved. Nevertheless, we try our best to proselytize for the reading and study of science fiction and to convey at least a small glimmer of understanding about the vast scope and social importance of this often-misunderstood literary genre. But it must be understood that the tangible social impact of such quoted media blurbs remains, by and large, inconsequential.

Finally, in terms of the type of sf scholarship that academic sf journals tend to promote, I will once again speak only for *SFS*—though I am sure that most of my observations tend to reflect the editorial philosophies of both *Extrapolation* and *Foundation* as well. We want articles that are intelligent, interesting, and original. We want articles that focus on works of science fiction, not fantasy or horror. Although we continue to accept articles on much-discussed authors like Stanislaw Lem, Philip K. Dick, and Ursula K. Le Guin, we especially welcome articles on any of the "Unjustly Neglected" science-fiction authors mentioned above. We also hope to see more articles on the history of sf, the sf of other countries, sf and the postmodern, feminism and sf, utopian and dystopian sf, sf and race, sf and music, sf and linguistics, gay and lesbian sf, prehistoric sf, religious sf, the commercial sf industry, and so on. As a rule, we and our many editorial consultants normally reject articles that are poorly written, unreadable because of excessive jargon, or either too narrow in scope or too vague. We also reject those that seem excessively *ad*

hominem, that lack critical depth, or that are simply too derivative and tread where so many others have already trod. In this arena, at least, we can justifiably be described as adhering to a particular "standard" and as exercising our editorial power to influence the shape of literary criticism in our field.

So, in the world at large, what constitutes the real "canonical authority" of scholarly sf journals like *Science Fiction Studies*, *Foundation*, and *Extrapolation*? There is no obvious answer, apart from the individual perception of our readers. Because of the complex social dynamics involved, because of the different priorities at play in the disparate worlds of academe, the publishing marketplace, and the fan-driven sf industry itself, and because psychology seems far more determinative in this matter than aesthetic judgment or economics, any amount of perceived influence and/or power may well be—like beauty—strictly in the eye of the beholder. But, in essence, isn't this where all "authority" truly originates?