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Histories

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History is fiction. Not the events, but the telling of them. From Herodotus to Jules Michelet to Howard Zinn, all historians chronicle the past; but they also invent its meaning. Writing history is not a scientific enterprise. As Brian Stableford once remarked, unlike natural scientists who “frame explanations by setting particular events in the context of general laws,” historians engage in a narrative process that is “more closely akin to fiction than most other kinds of nonfiction” (*Science Fact* 231). History, as the word itself implies, always tells a story.

There are many histories of science fiction (SF). But all of them are partial and partisan—that is, each has its own interpretive purpose, its own limitations of scope, and its own ideological biases. It is possible to classify these different SF histories into three distinct (but overlapping) groups according to their methodological approach: thematic/authorial, semiotic, or sociological.

Not taking into account the many amateur fanzines and reader commentaries in the SF pulp magazines, or early academic treatises on “imaginary voyage” literature (Atkinson, Gove), or a handful of seminal studies on utopias, the gothic, and fictional trips to the Moon (Mumford, Scarborough, Nicholson) produced before 1940, one could claim that the first monographic history of the SF genre was J. O. Bailey’s *Pilgrims Through Space and Time: Trends and Patterns in Scientific and Utopian Fiction* (1947). In this pioneering academic study, Bailey examines a wide range of SF authors and works, organizing them according to a host of recognizably SF themes (what is today often referred to as the SF “megatext”): for example, space travel, robots, time travel, aliens, world catastrophes, utopias, dystopias, hollow earths,

and wonderful machines. Other SF histories of this general type soon followed, first from the non-academic SF authorial and fan community (Damon Knight, Sam Moskowitz, Sam Lundwall) and then from the ranks of literary scholars in colleges and universities (Thomas D. Clareson, Everett Bleiler, Kingsley Amis, James Gunn). These early theme/author-based SF histories have a number of strengths, including the broad, inclusive scope of their vision and the historical genealogy they seek to establish for the genre. Bailey's book, for example, has been called "a remarkable catalogue of centuries of novels and stories" (Delany xvi) that "helped give the genre its own archeology and at least something of a pedigree" (Wolfe "History and Criticism" 525). But many of these theme/author-based SF histories also have some inherent weaknesses: they rely too heavily on plot description and rarely discuss the formal structure of the SF stories they treat, and they give little attention to the work's reading public(s) or socio-historical context. Further, at least in the case of the "populist" SF historian Sam Moskowitz, the documentary apparatus often seems maddeningly sketchy (prompting the founder of *Science Fiction Studies* R. D. Mullen to decry his "cavalier, disdainful dismissal" of the basic evidentiary procedures necessary for good scholarship). Although the thematic/authorial approach remains the most common way that people tend to identify the SF genre, it does not take into account the full range of SF subgenres (prehistoric, alternate history, steampunk, singularity fiction, and so on). And it would no doubt stumble badly when confronting contemporary "metafictional" or "slipstream" SF by authors such as Thomas Pynchon or China Miéville—that is, narratives whose referentiality goes well beyond the themes of the traditional SF megatext.

The second category of SF histories might be termed semiotic because they focus on the genre's narrative structure and how readers interact with it—a variant of what is sometimes referred to as "reader response" criticism. Although a few SF writers and critics first began

talking about the protocols of reading SF during the 1950s and 1960s (Judith Merril, Samuel R. Delany), the most prominent practitioner of this approach is probably Darko Suvin in his watershed study *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (1979). In this book, Suvin analyzes SF as a popular (and subversive) literature of “cognitive estrangement,” and he traces its evolution from Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) to the work of Karel Čapek in the 1920s and 1930s. Suvin’s now-famous opus followed in the footsteps of an earlier trailblazing study by Robert M. Philmus (the first SF history to be published by an American university press) and was soon joined by others examining SF as rhetorical technique by Gary K. Wolfe, Robert Scholes, Samuel R. Delany, Christine Brooke-Rose, Carl Malmgren, and others.

One reason why Suvin’s *Metamorphoses* became so renowned was because his semiotic approach to defining SF offered an especially useful way to distinguish between SF and other fictional genres. Contrary to what occurs in realist narratives, the estrangement-causing novum portrayed in SF must be radically different from the reader’s actual empirical environment. And, contrary to most fantasy and horror, it must eschew the supernatural and present a certain level of scientific (or pseudo-scientific) verisimilitude. Lastly, as a result of the “what if...?” alternate reality it implies, the SF novum must trigger cognition and stimulate reader reflection on the nature of the real. In doing so, it not only elicits a certain “sense of wonder” (which attracts many to the genre) but it also duplicates the scientific method as the reader engages in a “thought experiment” and follows it through to its logical conclusion.

The most obvious weakness in SF histories using a semiotic approach is that their preferred analytical vantage point tends to be synchronic rather than diachronic and their chronological coverage is often woefully incomplete—for example, Suvin’s “history” ignores

most of the twentieth century. But this approach does have another useful advantage: it serves as a handy tool for distinguishing between good science fiction (“SF” or “sf”) and bad science fiction (“sci-fi”). For example, it shows how science-fictional novels and films that generate significant amounts of cognition—such as Stanislaw Lem’s *Solaris* (1961) or Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982)—are more challenging and ultimately more rewarding than those requiring much less—such as Edgar Rice Burroughs’s *A Princess of Mars* (1912) or Danny Cannon’s *Judge Dredd* (1995).

The third category of SF histories leans heavily on the sociological. It defines the genre not in terms of its thematic content or how it activates a specific set of reading protocols but, rather, according to how SF grew out of and/or manifests certain socio-historical trends. It may, for example, chronicle the emergence and development of a national SF tradition (for example, France (Lofficier), Canada (Ketterer), Great Britain (Ruddick), or Japan (Bolton et al.)). It may explore the evolution of a particular type of SF, such as “futuristic fiction” (Alkon), “future-war fiction” (Clarke), “scientific romance” (Stableford), or “feminist SF” (Lefanu, Larbalestier, Merrick). Or it may discuss the place of SF in society, either through its publishing venues (Ashley), its fandom (Del Rey), its ideology (Huntington, Rieder), or even its “science fiction thinking” (Landon, Csicsery-Ronay). One excellent example of this kind of cultural SF history is Roger Luckhurst’s *Science Fiction* (2005), in which SF is treated as a by-product of “technologically saturated societies” (3).

The advantages of this particular approach include its interpretive breadth (according to Luckhurst, it seeks “to situate SF texts in a broad network of contexts and disciplinary knowledges” [2]) as well as its objectivity in exploring the political and anthropological “historicity” of the genre—for example, how SF expressed the impact of evolving technologies

on human subjectivity, what social mechanisms caused it to be judged a “low” literary genre, or how it interacted with and was influenced by the dominant institutions and ideologies of its time. But, at least in Luckhurst’s book, its field of vision remains limited both geographically (to only two national traditions) and chronologically (to only the post-Victorian)—that is, it concentrates exclusively on the two paradigms of British SF and American SF from the late 1880s onward. As a result, it ignores the contributions of important non-Anglophone SF authors (such as J.-H. Rosny aîné, Kurd Lasswitz, Karel Čapek, Stanislaw Lem, the Strugatskys, or Kobo Abé, among many others) as well as SF authors and works from before the 1880s. In all fairness, Luckhurst openly acknowledges his narrow Anglo-American prejudice, saying “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” (10). But there is no such acknowledgment of limitation—or even the slightest hint of flexibility—in what he sees as the definitive chronological starting point for the genre: “In my view, it makes little sense to talk about ‘science fiction’ before 1880” (16).

It is true that every SF history must tell its own SF “origin story.” And this story influences both how the SF historian goes about defining the genre (as themed speculation, as hermeneutic practice, or as cultural artifact) and how he or she conceives the genre’s historical identity. As one critic summed it up: the “starting point inevitably affects what we see as the history (and the prehistory) of the genre, which in turn changes our perception of what science fiction is. It is a mobius loop: the definition affects the perception of the historical starting point, which in turn affects the definition” (Kincaid 45). But the logical possibilities are finite in number, and most SF historians trace the genesis of the genre from one of three historical time periods: from before the nineteenth century (starting, for example, with Lucian of Samosata, More, Kepler, or Godwin), from the nineteenth century (with Shelley, Poe, Verne, or Wells), or

from the early twentieth century (with Hugo Gernsback, John W. Campbell, and the American pulp magazines).

Before the explosion of academic SF criticism that began during the 1970s, most SF writers and critics took it for granted that the genre originated in the novels of Jules Verne's "extraordinary voyages" and H. G. Wells's "scientific romances." Kingsley Amis, for example, in his popular SF history *New Maps of Hell* (1960), expressed what was common knowledge at the time when he said: "Whatever else he may or may not have been, Jules Verne is certainly to be regarded as one of the two creators of modern science fiction; the other, inevitably enough, is H.G. Wells" (31). In terms of the thematic and ideological content of their tales, both Verne and Wells were universally seen as exemplars of what SF should be—a composite grafting of the scientific onto the fictional ("hard" in Verne, "soft" in Wells) and a socially conscious brand of literature glorifying the quest for new knowledge (Verne) while cautioning against the dangers that such knowledge might bring to an imperfect and ever-changing world (Wells).

This traditional view of Verne and Wells as complementary "fathers" of science fiction was challenged in 1973 by a new and highly influential SF history called *Billion Year Spree: the True History of Science Fiction* by noted British writer and critic Brian Aldiss. In it, Aldiss proposed Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein* as the original ur-text for all SF. And he put forward an entirely new definition of the genre, claiming that it is "characteristically cast in the Gothic or post-Gothic mode" (25). Aldiss's book and its Hugo-winning expansion *Trillion Year Spree* (1986)—probably due, at least in part, to the immense upsurge of the "feminist '70s" (see Attebery) and the many feminist critical studies of the 1980s—had great success. And his strong valorization of Mary Shelley opened the door to a complete reevaluation of the traditional Verne-Wells "origins story" for the SF genre.

By the 1980s and 1990s, the study of SF was already well established in college classrooms and a growing number of academic scholars were publishing in the field. Some of these scholars—such as Paul K. Alkon in his *Science Fiction Before 1900* (1994)—followed Aldiss’s lead, stating unequivocally that “Science fiction starts with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*” (1). Some—such as Edward James in his *Science Fiction in the 20th Century* (1994)—championed H.G. Wells as an important turning point in the development of modern SF. Some—such as Tom Moylan in his *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (2000)—treated the genre as inextricably linked to the development of early utopias and dystopias. And, in their own search for SF’s origins, some academics—such as Everett F. Bleiler in his *Science-Fiction: The Early Years* (1990) and Adam Roberts in his *The History of Science Fiction* (2006)—ventured back to Johannes Kepler and the birth of science during the Renaissance or even further back to the speculative literature and myths of Ancient Greece.

Finally, the newest wrinkle in this ongoing “birther” debate about SF’s earliest prototypes began to emerge in the 1990s. It argued that true science fiction (the genre as well as the name) was born in the American pulp magazines of the 1920s and 1930s, midwifed by Hugo Gernsback. It was Gernsback who, in the 1926 inaugural issue of *Amazing Stories*, famously defined SF as “the Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and Edgar Allan Poe type of story—a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision” (3). The primary promoter of this new SF origin story was Gary Westfahl who, in his *The Mechanics of Wonder* (1998) and in many other writings, energetically proselytized Gernsback’s importance as the unsung father of SF. Westfahl states categorically, for example, that Gernsback “made science fiction a recognized literary form” (1) and “stands as the first person to create and announce a history of science fiction” (67). Mostly as a result of Westfahl’s advocacy, the idea that Gernsback and the

American pulp magazines were the ontological source for the SF genre has resonated among some contemporary SF critics and historians. Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint, for instance, in their excellent *The Routledge Concise History of Science Fiction* (2011) openly acknowledge that certain SF-like literary “traditions” and “rubrics” did indeed exist before the twentieth century and were “in circulation long before anyone thought to call them ‘SF’.” But they still find it “problematic to label any of these texts—or the traditions they exemplify—as ‘SF’ since it is only as the *name* and the *idea* of the genre were introduced that actants began, retrospectively and inconsistently, to understand them as belonging, as least potentially, to SF” (35; emphasis added). Such an argument—demanding that a literary genre have a fixed name and that its practitioners self-consciously identify themselves by that name before the genre can be deemed to exist—seems unduly reductive. And it also seems to give too much credence to the (mistaken) belief that *all* of today’s SF is necessarily derived from what we now call “genre SF”—the variety of SF popularized in the pulp magazines of the 1920s and 1930s.

This unresolved question of SF’s “true origins” has been the source of another ongoing debate: whether to use the epithet “proto” or “early” when discussing works of pre-1940 SF. At stake is more than just semantics. The term “proto” implies that *real* science fiction came into being at a later date, whereas “early” implies that it came into being at some time prior. For example, SF historians who believe that Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* was SF’s original source text would no doubt classify the works of Verne and Wells as “early SF.” Others who believe that SF did not truly emerge as a genre until the term “science fiction” came into widespread use in the 1930s would probably classify Verne and Wells as “proto-SF.” I would suggest, however, that the term “proto-sf” is intrinsically biased and dismissive toward SF produced before the pulp era. The term “early sf,” though admittedly more vague, offers the

distinct advantage of not defining its subject exclusively and retroactively in terms of a later narrative form. It allows premodern science-fictional texts to stand on their own and to be considered in their own historical specificity, rather than be viewed simply as a kind of quaint and unfinished “pre”-version of the “real” SF yet to come.

SF histories can also be found in a variety of published formats. Most of the titles cited above are monographs and books, some written by fans or SF authors and some by academics, some produced by popular presses and some by university presses. But other shorter essay-length histories of the genre have also regularly appeared in SF encyclopedias such as those authored or edited by Brian Ash (1977), George Mann (2001) or, more notably, by John Clute and Peter Nicholls (1993). They can also be found in a growing number of SF handbooks, critical guides, and reference volumes such as Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn’s *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (2003), Neil Barron’s *Anatomy of Wonder* (5 editions, 1976–2004), David Seed’s *A Companion to Science Fiction* (2005), and *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* (2009) edited by Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts, and Sherryl Vint. Histories of the genre are also implicit in most SF historical anthologies, not only in their introductions and headnotes but also in the stories that are chosen for inclusion. Consider the differing range of SF authors featured, for example, in the anthologies by August Derleth (1950, from Plato to Bradbury); James Gunn (1977-1998, from Lucian to Herbert W. Franke); Eric S. Rabkin (1983, from Cyrano to Ursula K. Le Guin); Tom Shippey (1992, from Wells to David Brin); Garyn G. Roberts (2003, from Shelley to Jack Williamson); and in the recent *Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction* by Arthur B. Evans, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., Joan Gordon, Veronica Hollinger, Rob Latham, and Carol McGuirk (2010, from Hawthorne to Ted Chiang).

Of special interest in this category of SF anthologies is *The Secret History of Science Fiction* (2009), edited by James Patrick Kelly and John Kessel. In their introduction, the editors bemoan the lack of literary quality in most contemporary SF and explain: “What we hope to present in this anthology is an alternative vision of sf from the early 1970s to the present, one in which it becomes evident that the literary potential of sf was not squandered” (8). A similar editorial strategy was attempted over a decade earlier in *The Norton Book of Science Fiction* (1993), edited by Ursula K. Le Guin and Brian Attebery. Marketed as a teaching anthology, it featured over sixty short stories from 1960 to 1990 that were described as presenting a “glimpse of the story of science fiction itself during the first thirty years of its maturity” when the genre experienced an “increase in the number of writers and readers, the breadth of subject, the depth of treatment, the sophistication of languages and technique, and the political and literary consciousness of the writing” (18). Although the editors were careful to deny any “historical intent” (17) or genre representativeness in their selection of stories, the anthology was nevertheless criticized by many SF critics as presenting a skewed and inaccurate picture of the genre. One critic went so far as to characterize the book as “a Big Lie of Orwellian dimensions, useful only to people who wish to falsify and distort science fiction, not those who wish to teach it” (Westfahl, “Review”).

Gary K. Wolfe, in his essay “History and Criticism” (1995), contends that all critical discourse about SF came out of three traditions: fan discussions in the pulp magazines of the 1920s and 1930s, commentaries on each other’s work by SF authors in the 1940s and 1950s, and academic studies from the 1960s onward (483–85). But, as I have pointed out in “The Origins of Science Fiction Criticism” (1999), how one defines the first texts of SF criticism is closely tied to how one defines the genre itself and its starting point. For example, Kepler’s *Somnium* (1634)

and his appended *Notes* might well qualify as Western literature's first work of SF, of SF criticism, and perhaps even of SF history (since he speaks of the influence of Plutarch and Lucian on his story). In the late eighteenth-century, the anthologist Charles Garnier was certainly acknowledging the existence of a separate and identifiable literary tradition of speculative fiction when he gathered together and annotated a 36-volume collection called *Voyages imaginaires, songes, visions, et romans cabalistiques* (Imaginary Voyages, Dreams, Visions, and Cabalistic Novels, 1785–89). Included in the collection was an impressive array of 71 early SF works by authors such as Lucian, Holberg, Cyrano de Bergerac, Defoe, Swift, Paltock, Grivel, and many others. Another candidate for the honor of first SF critic might be Camille Flammarion, whose *Les Mondes imaginaires et les mondes réels* (Imaginary and Real Worlds, 1864) is described by Brian Stableford as “an early historical analysis of speculative fiction in its scientific context” (*Science Fact* 180). As I have repeatedly suggested in the present essay, critical writing about SF is not and has never been exclusive to the editorial pages of the American pulp magazines, to the “tips of the trade” columns written by established SF authors such as James Blish or Damon Knight, or to the scholarly exegeses produced in the halls of academe.

In terms of their point of view, methodology, and scope, today's SF histories have evolved a great deal from Bailey's *Pilgrims in Space and Time*. Some reflect new trends in social awareness and gender identity: witness, for example, the huge surge of (often historical) feminist SF criticism by scholars such as Sarah Lefanu, Jenny Wolmark, Marleen S. Barr, Jane Donawerth, Justine Larbalestier, Lisa Yaszek, and Helen Merrick. Some offer new socio-political and epistemological insights on “SF theory,” such as the studies by Fredric Jameson, Carl Freedman, and Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. And some explore SF's long and complex relationship with ideologies of race and imperialism in critical works by DeWitt Douglas Kilgore

and John Rieder. But beyond their more specialized focus, the most visible difference between today's SF histories and those earlier ones from 1960s and 1970s has to do with their respective chronological coverage. There has been a discernible shift during the past few decades in how SF historians are configuring the genre's past. In a nutshell, the earlier histories gave a disproportionately large amount of attention to pre-1900 SF whereas today's SF histories seem to be progressively de-emphasizing it.

As evidence of this shift, let us first consider two traditional SF histories from the earlier period: Moskowitz's *Explorers of the Infinite* (1963) and Aldiss's *Billion Year Spree* (1973). In each, *more than half* of the chapters are devoted to SF authors and works dating from before the pulp era. Or note the studies by H. Bruce Franklin (1966), Robert M. Philmus (1970), and David Ketterer (1974), all of which concentrate entirely on the nineteenth century or before. Or look at the historical overviews appearing in the first edition of Barron's *Anatomy of Wonder* (1976), which features three essays on pre-Golden Age SF, covering 1870 to 1937, and only one essay on the modern period from 1938–1975. Even the history of SF showcased in Darko Suvin's *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979), as mentioned, extends no further than H. G. Wells, Russian SF, and Karel Čapek—all listed in the Table of Contents under the rubric of "Introduction to Newer SF History." One reason why these (mostly academic) literary historians from the 1960s and 1970s spent so much time and expended so much exegetical energy on SF authors and works from the pre-twentieth century was because they were consciously trying to establish an honorable—that is, mainstream—lineage for SF in order to make it more acceptable as a literary genre. As Franklin has explained, "Those of us who escorted science fiction into the formal parties of the academy in the mid-1960s labored hard to make it look respectable. That

was one reason we documented its long pedigree and heritage from the literary canon” (“Transforming” 197).

Let us now time-travel some four decades or so to the present and examine some recent SF histories. The historical overviews contained in James and Mendlesohn’s *Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (2003) are evenly divided into four distinct periods: “origins to 1926,” “1926–1960,” “1960–1980,” and “1980 to the present.” The fifth edition of Barron’s *Anatomy of Wonder* (2005) now features two essays on pre-Golden Age SF (1516–1939) and three on more modern SF (since 1940). Even more telling is the chronological focus of Bould and Vint’s *Concise History of Science Fiction* (2011), which offers a single chapter on “Science fictions before Gernsback” followed by seven chapters on the SF from the 1930s to the 1990s. The pattern is clear: today’s SF historians have sharply reduced the amount of coverage they are giving to pre-twentieth-century SF. Is the genre now sufficiently “mapped” so that it no longer needs to identify its roots? Has it become so academically respectable that its inclusion in university curricula no longer demands canonical justification? Has the consensus about the genre’s origins among SF scholars begun to shift away from the nineteenth century (or before) and gravitate toward the early twentieth? There are no definitive answers to these questions. But the perceived importance of authors such as Jules Verne in the history of the genre has changed dramatically in recent years. In 1963, Sam Moskowitz described Verne as SF’s true patriarch, saying: “[H]e was the first author to develop consciously and consistently an approach to the genre which turned it into a specialized form of literature, quite distinct from fantasy, the Gothic horror tale, the fictional political utopia, or the imaginatively embroidered travel tale” (73). In 2005, in his well regarded cultural history of SF, Roger Luckhurst ignores Verne entirely.

Finally, historians of the genre have, since the 1980s, frequently ventured beyond the literary, beyond Anglo-American SF, and beyond the standard subgenres of the field. This development is especially appropriate since today's SF, as Brooks Landon has aptly observed, "is no longer 'just' fiction, but has become a universally recognized category of film, television, music, music videos, electronic games, theme parks, military thinking, and advertising, and its concepts and icons are now routinely appropriated for the development and marketing of products ranging from breakfast cereals to pickup trucks" (xv). The medium of SF film and television has been expertly explored by scholars such as Vivian Sobchack and J. P. Telotte. Several non-Anglophone SF histories are now available by Jean-Marc and Randy Lofficier for France; by Christopher Bolton, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., and Takayuki Tatsumi for Japan; by Rachel Haywood Ferreira for Latin America; and by Russell Blackford, Van Ikin, and Sean McMullen for Australia, among others. And, lastly, a growing number of works produced during these early years of the 21st century have demonstrated the remarkable breadth of today's SF scholarship. Some—such as Robert Crossley's *Imagining Mars* (2011)—remain steadfastly traditional in their historical approach. Others—such as Peter Fitting's *Subterranean Worlds* (2004) and Nicholas Ruddick's *The Fire in the Stone* (2009)—focus our attention on important and yet neglected SF subgenres. And still others—such as Rob Latham's *Consuming Youth* (2002) and several essays in the collection *Queer Universes* (2008), edited by Wendy Pearson, Veronica Hollinger, and Joan Gordon—are helping to push the envelope of SF critical inquiry toward exciting new frontiers.

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