

# New Europe College Yearbook 2013-2014



---

MARIAN VIOREL ANĂSTĂSOAIE  
DANIEL ANDERSSON  
NORAH BENARROSH-ORSONI  
FRANCESCA BIAGIOLI  
TREASA CAMPBELL  
DANIEL CRISTEA-ENACHE  
LUCIE GUESNIER  
DAMIEN GUILLAUME  
TAMÁS KISS  
SARA KUEHN  
JONATHAN MURPHY  
DOMINIC NEGRICI  
MLADEN OSTOJIĆ  
NAOMI VAN STEENBERGEN

---

Editor: Irina Vainovski-Mihai

Copyright – New Europe College  
ISSN 1584-0298

New Europe College  
Str. Plantelor 21  
023971 Bucharest  
Romania  
[www.nec.ro](http://www.nec.ro); e-mail: [nec@nec.ro](mailto:nec@nec.ro)

Tel. (+4) 021.307.99.10, Fax (+4) 021. 327.07.74



## DOMINIC NEGRICI

Born in 1983, in Craiova

Ph.D. in Philology, University of Bucharest (2012)

Thesis: *Word and Image in the Works of Alain Robbe-Grillet*

Independent researcher and editor for the Romanian Academy Publishing  
House

Davidson Library visiting scholar, University of California, Santa Barbara

Has authored a number of articles in the fields of Literary Theory, French  
Literature, Film Studies, Cultural Studies and has translated two books



# GRINDING MANKIND'S HOPES AND FEARS FOR FREE: AN ATTEMPT TO REPOSITION SCIENCE FICTION AS A CULTURAL VOCATION

## Abstract

The purpose of this article is twofold. After presenting the plausible reasons why science fiction is still a heavily bastardized field, I shall attempt to coin a manner in which it can be used – as an apparatus, for a change, and not as a category – to make our understanding of history and culture itself more operative. The following text is the first phase (the synthetic one) of a project – or rather of a manifesto – pleading for a rethinking of SF as a universally human futurological vector.

**Keywords:** science fiction, cultural vocation, repositioning, operatization.

“Historical writing mirrors literary writing in many ways, sharing the strong reliance on narrative for meaning, therefore ruling out the possibility for objective or truly scientific history.”<sup>1</sup>

“History is most successful when it embraces this ‘narrativity’, since it is what allows history to be meaningful.”<sup>2</sup>

Hayden White

The spark of this preliminary investigation is closely linked to a certain type of personal intellectual discontent, which seems to become more frequent by the years. For example, what prompted – and subsequently generated – my Ph.D. thesis was the fact that, among other things, I was dissatisfied with the *status quo* of film, as a much-too-derivative medium, and, as such, proceeded to a series of situational experiments hopefully

leading to its individuation and autonomy from other tributary means of ideation (such as literature, photography, etc.). In this particular case, I saw a genre (and not a medium) that seemed stuck in a commonly accepted limbo.

We are always either *dismissing* or *writing off* things as “being science fiction”. There is even an expression that goes like that. What is the explanation behind such attitudes? Can’t (and won’t) anyone at least try to pull SF back from a somewhat fatigued basket of genre literature and into a perhaps well-earned spotlight within our collective consciousness?

It seems appropriate, at this point, to describe (and decry) the situation we are faced with, as science fiction scholars.

This intellectual climate is perchance best outlined by a quotation from British medievalist and SF scholar Tom Shippey’s 2002 article *Literary Gatekeepers and the Fabril Tradition*,<sup>3</sup> describing the relationship of the field with the American academic community:

*A further way of putting this is to say that during my “science fiction” lifetime (from 1958 until now), being a science fiction reader has been rather like being gay... In both cases, one could say, drawing out the similarities:*

- *There was definite pressure, especially during the 1950’s and the 60’s, not to admit the fact.*
- *There were social penalties if you did.*
- *You got used to hiding the fact.*
- *But there were places where you could meet others of the same persuasion.*
- *And there was very strong “networking” among the concealed in-group.*
- *In both cases, too, discrimination was illegal, was frowned upon theoretically, and people would deny they were doing it, but they did it just the same.*
- *Finally, it was possible to “come out” and get away with it, but only when you reached a certain level of seniority.*

It is true, we must admit that the social climate actually *has* changed, mainly because modern academia is fascinated by novelty, but not to a sensible degree. There still exists a certain form of cultural oppression (evidently, it would be compulsory to identify its power actors, if any),

and I wonder if there is still, nowadays, a certain hegemonic normative culture filter... But these matters will have to be included in a future paper.

Consequently, at first I endeavored to identify the most important factors that led to this bastardization of the genre: its perception at a cultural level and the undercurrents that put together this psycho-social response: the various prominent actors that relentlessly contribute to an enforced marginalization, and the causes of high-hat tendencies in high-profile literary criticism and theory.

Also, the internal machineries of sabotage need to be outlined and exposed, as well. Here we are referring, most obviously, to the distinctions between sub-genres, distinctions that produce standalone categories easily used and abused to synecdochically describe SF: for instance, we needed to deconstruct a certain space-operatic imperative/ineluctability prescribed by pop culture, a phenomenon that constantly injects volume into the very definition of science-fiction in order to monopolize meaning by numbers alone.<sup>4</sup> Its constant heterogenization never helped.

Secondly, I believe an inventory of those vectors able to exert a comprehensive rehabilitation and undoubted legitimation of the genre – that which I call the process of *de-bastardization* – needs to be put together.

The ominous feeling of segregation that we mentioned earlier was, in fact, expressed by Jonathan Lethem in an essay published in the *Village Voice* entitled “Close Encounters: The Squandered Promise of Science Fiction”.<sup>5</sup> Lethem advocates that the point in 1973 when Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* was nominated for the Nebula Award, and subsequently disregarded in favor of Arthur C. Clarke’s *Rendezvous with Rama*, stands as “a hidden tombstone marking the death of the hope that SF was about to merge with the mainstream”.

Nevertheless, detractors of this viewpoint aren’t scarce; moreover, they end up acting as such in surprising manners. One of the responses to Lethem’s take came from the editor of the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, who asked: “When is it [the SF genre] ever going to realize it can’t win the game of trying to impress the mainstream?”.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, we can easily notice a fierce battle between standpoints taking place, but, as an objective observer of this conflict, I find that neither approach can contribute to better understanding the essence of science fiction; neither will rightly harness its beneficial properties, nor help in fairly, deservedly repositioning the genre in the vast landscape of the human spirit.

As I see it, it is – at its core – a struggle between two incorrect attitudes: insular *fanboy*-ism from the inside and snobbish snubbing from the outside.

Commenting on this very aspect, journalist and author David Barnett states the following:

The ongoing, endless war between “literary” fiction and “genre” fiction has well-defined lines in the sand. Genre’s foot soldiers think that literary fiction is a collection of meaningless but prettily drawn pictures of the human condition. The literary guard consider genre fiction to be crass, commercial, whizz-bang potboilers. Or so it goes.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, Barnett, in an earlier essay, had also pointed to a slightly more pragmatic effect of this malignant peripheralization:

What do novels about a journey across post-apocalyptic America, a clone waitress rebelling against a future society, a world-girdling pipe of special gas keeping mutant creatures at bay, a plan to rid a colonizable new world of dinosaurs, and genetic engineering in a collapsed civilization have in common?

They are all most definitely not science fiction.<sup>8</sup>

Literary bibliophiles will probably recognize *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, one of the sections of *Cloud Atlas* by David Mitchell, *The Gone-Away World* by Nick Harkaway, *The Stone Gods* by Jeanette Winterson, and *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood from their descriptions above.

To shed light on the matter, all of these novels use the tropes and topoi of what the largest portion of the audience regards as science fiction, but their authors and/or publishers have made substantial efforts to ensure that they are not pigeonholed as such.

And yet, writers continue to write, the genre lives on, thrives commercially, and is appreciated by an increasing number of people. So, at least in the eyes of this particular researcher, it appears that we are stuck. It is my opinion that, between those two conflicting visions, bridges need to be built, not haphazardly burnt or sometimes even denied existence. Questions must be asked, mechanisms explained, and compatibilities laid out.

\*

Furthermore, in order to draw more outlines of the chaos governing the field, let us take a look at all these definitions of SF by renowned authors and scholars:

- The definition that defeats its own purpose (Everett K. Bleiler):

Science fiction is not a unitary genre or form, hence cannot be encompassed in a single definition. It is an assemblage of genres and subgenres that are not intrinsically closely related, but are generally accepted as an area of publication by a marketplace.<sup>9</sup>

- The much too universal definition (David Brin):

Many people have tried to define science fiction. I like to call it the literature of exploration and change. While other genres obsess upon so-called eternal verities, SF deals with the possibility that our children may have different problems. They may, indeed, be different than we have been.<sup>10</sup>

- The “SF is philosophy” definition (Ray Bradbury):

I define science fiction as the art of the possible. Fantasy is the art of the impossible. Science fiction, again, is the history of ideas, and they’re always ideas that work themselves out and become real and happen in the world.<sup>11</sup>

- The happily vague definition (Larry Niven):

The brightest minds in our field have been trying to find a definition of science fiction for these past seventy years. The short answer is, science fiction stories are given as possible, not necessarily here and now, but somewhere, sometime.<sup>12</sup>

- The kinky definition (Arthur C. Clarke):

Attempting to define science fiction is an undertaking almost as difficult, though not so popular, as trying to define pornography... In both pornography and SF, the problem lies in knowing exactly where to draw the line.<sup>13</sup>

- The perplexing trinity (Farah Mendelsohn, Damon Knight, and respectively John W. Campbell):

*Science Fiction is an argument with the universe.*<sup>14</sup>

*Science fiction is what we point to when we say it.*<sup>15</sup>

*Science fiction is what I say it is.*<sup>16</sup>

As a result, after reading these extremely dissimilar attempts at locating science fiction, it becomes quite tempting to plunge into a definition of the very process of *defining*, but that nudges us out of cultural studies and into pure philosophy. I believe proceeding along the lines of such a strategy is not the best option, since taking a simple, traversing look at the history of literary and cultural production will bring us closer to the issue at hand, as it shall become apparent in the following paragraphs.

\*

Ever since we created the first work of art, I believe our most vicious enemy has been temporal myopia.

Of course, to proceed, we need to envision how this *future of Man* has been imagined during the entire course of history, so I started looking at the history of world literature and found some very stimulating examples. I'm going to ask you to bear with me throughout this voyage.

What I intend to do is bypass the 20<sup>th</sup> century entirely, the main reason being that it has famously been at the center of an overwhelming number of disputes concerning SF and – as my upcoming undertakings throughout the present study shall soon reveal – one of my chief interests is, in fact, the possibility of a world predominantly immune to the prevalence of the scientific/technical approach. Therefore, I will focus primarily on analyzing what the 19<sup>th</sup> century has to offer. (*Fig. 1*)

It is a less known fact that Jack London authored a number of science fiction stories, three of which I will mention here by name: *The Red One* (a tale about aliens), *The Iron Heel* (a story taking place in the future, as Jack London imagined it would be), and *The Unparalleled Invasion* (a narrative including biological warfare and ethnic purging in a dystopian future). Jack London also authored a tale about invisibility and one focusing on the creation of an uncontrollable energy device. It was these stories that initiated a certain shaping of the genre's very structure.

In his turn, Mark Twain explored science-related subjects in his novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. By way of such processes

as the “transmigration of souls” and the “transposition of epochs – and bodies”, the Yankee in Twain’s novel gets to travel back in time, taking all the information he has on 19<sup>th</sup> century technology with him. *A Connecticut Yankee*, which was written in 1889, appears to anticipate World War I, which crushed Europe’s past notions of gallantry in conflict, replacing them with different, more destructive weaponry, as well as much less elegant battlefield maneuvers.

The runner-up on the U.S. best-selling novel list in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and also one of the most successful literary works in the history of early American science fiction is the novel *Looking Backward* (1888) by Edward Bellamy, a book whose influence extends much further than the field of fiction itself. Observing the society of the present, *Looking Backward* infers and then generates at a literary level a possible model of the future.

However, even earlier than 1888 – in 1835, that is –, writer Edgar Allan Poe published a short story titled “The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall”, which describes in minute detail the manner in which a balloon flight to the Moon takes place. The tale includes every step of the process in the report, from the actual launch to the method used for the cabin’s manufacturing, also describing strata and several other science-based elements and techniques.

Therefore, it becomes quite obvious that Jules Verne and H.G. Wells were not the only authors populating the literary history of early science fiction. It is well known that several short stories and short novels whose topics entered the realm of imaginary, not-yet-possible endeavors were printed in periodicals at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. What is noteworthy is that a significant number of these literary works made use of scientific concepts as a catalyst for the works of the imagination. (Fig. 2)

It was in 1836 that author Alexander Veltman published *Predki Kalimerosa: Aleksandr Filippovich Makedonskii* – in translation: *The forebears of Kalimeros: Alexander, son of Philip of Macedon* –, which is known as the very first original science fiction novel written in Russian and also the first novel ever to bring forth the topic of time travel. The story goes like this: the storyteller rides to ancient Greece, where he gets to meet Aristotle; afterwards, prior to returning to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he goes on an expedition with none other than Alexander the Great.

Moving on to the situation in France, one must mention *Napoleon et la Conquête du Monde*, written in 1836 by Louis Geoffroy. The novel writes an alternate history in which Napoleon has conquered the world. Two other titles worth mentioning are *Le Roman de l’Avenir* (1834) by

Félix Bodin and *Le Monde Tel Qu'il Sera* (1846) by Emile Souvestre, both attempts at predicting what the following century might look like.

In *The Legend of the Centuries* (1859), Victor Hugo – undoubtedly influenced by the scientific principles of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and, most of all, by the notion of mankind's advancement – wrote an extensive two-part poem called *20<sup>th</sup> century*. Being easily interpreted as a dystopian/utopian fiction, it first renders the image of a colossal shipwreck: the devastated body of a ship, once the utmost creation of an arrogant and reckless mankind that named it Leviathan, drifting through a forsaken world – winds blowing and the fury of Nature in distress unleashed; humanity, at last unified and at peace, has taken a starship and left Earth to live somewhere on a faraway star, hoping to find freedom in the infinite lights of the Cosmos.

But let us continue our imaginary journey taking a leap even further back into literary history. Thus we shall discover that there are splendid instances of proto-science fiction to be found in the Enlightenment Era and the Age of Reason, as well: *La Découverte Australe par un Homme Volant* (1781) by Nicolas-Edmé Restif de la Bretonne includes a series of significantly visionary creations.

*L'An 2440* (1771) by Louis-Sébastien Mercier provides its readers with an intensely prophetic interpretation of existence in the 25<sup>th</sup> century as foreseen by the novel's author.

*Memoirs of the Twentieth Century* (1733) by Samuel Madden tells the tale of a storyteller from 1728 who is provided by his guardian angel with several state documents from the year 1997–1998, a narrative stratagem similar to later time travel novels. The story, nonetheless, does not include any details on the actual manner in which the angel managed to obtain the forms in question.

This was a historical period during which a significant number of novels including the *Hollow Earth* plot mechanism (one was authored by none other than Casanova himself) came to be extremely popular with the general public. Numerous other literary creations focused on fictional expeditions to the Moon. The first ones to tackle this topic were the cosmological novel *Somnium (The Dream)*, written by Johannes Kepler in 1634, and *The Man in the Moone* (1638) by Francis Godwin – which is deemed to be the very first work of science fiction written in the English language. (Fig. 3)

For another convincing argument as to the enthusiasm that the genre generated even at that particular point in history, one should remember that Francis Bacon himself wrote such a novel, namely *New Atlantis*.

However, it is of the utmost importance for the success of this experiment that we travel even *further* back in time – in the good sci-fi tradition –, in order to gain better perspective by detecting all the ancient, as well as early modern pioneers of the genre.

Although it may sound utterly astonishing, the use of science fiction elements in fiction goes as far back as the 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> century AD, as it is encountered in more than a few stories of the *One Thousand and One Nights* (chiefly known in English as the *Arabian Nights*) classic. One such instance is cited in Robert Irwin's 2003 book *The Arabian Nights: A Companion*, specifically "The Adventures of Bulukiya". According to the story, the protagonist (Bulukiya) goes on a quest, searching for an herb to grant him immortality. Throughout his journey, he ends up travelling the oceans of the world, reaches the Garden of Eden, as well as Jahannam, and explores the cosmos. Therefore, he gets to explore diverse realms considerably larger than his own, foreshadowing elements of galactic science fiction in the process, as he comes across civilizations of mermaids, jinns, talking trees, and talking serpents, as well as other forms of life.

Moreover, in "Abdullah the Fisherman and Abdullah the Merman", the main character is endowed with the extraordinary ability to breathe underwater, whilst discovering a submarine society. This alternate society is basically depicted as a reversed mirror image of our own earthly civilization; hence, the underwater social order functions according to rules mimicking some sort of primeval form of communism, where notions such as money or clothing have been simply abolished. Other tales pertaining to the *Arabian Nights* classic dwell on long-gone ancient technologies, progressive antique societies gone astray, and calamities which overcame them.

The 1992 book *Story-Telling Techniques in the Arabian Nights* by David Pinault includes an account of the story "The Ebony Horse", which features a robot built in the shape of a key-controlled mechanical horse that can fly into deep space, in the direction of the Sun. Other instances of proto-science fiction in early Arabic texts include works such as *Opinions of the residents of a splendid city* by Al-Farabi, which tells the story of an ideal society, as well as the futuristic account of Awaj bin Anfaq by author Al-Qazwini, which describes the voyage of a man who reached Earth after a long journey from a faraway planet.

Furthermore, in the opinion of present-day researcher Abu Shadi Al-Roubi, the Arabic dogmatic novel *Fāḍil ibn Nātiq* – written by Arabian polymath author Ibn al-Nafis around the year 1270 and otherwise known as *Theologus Autodidactus* – contains two closing chapters which could be easily labeled as science fiction. The doctrinal novel under discussion features numerous elements characteristic of the science fiction genre – namely futurology, spontaneous generation, eschatology, apocalyptic leitmotifs, resurrection, and the afterlife.

However – and this is perhaps the most thought-provoking part of it all –, instead of offering paranormal or allegorical justifications for such happenings, Ibn al-Nafis struggles to elucidate these uncanny elements in the story by making use of his own wide-ranging scientific knowledge in the field of biology, anatomy, physiology, geology, astronomy, and cosmology. For instance, it was this novel which helped Ibn al-Nafis present his scientific concept of metabolism<sup>17</sup>. In addition, he strives to elucidate – in a scientifically sound manner – strange occurrences such as the physical revival of a corpse by referencing his own discoveries (in this case, pulmonary circulation).

In the same way, researcher Christopher Yorke published “Malchronia: Cryonics and Bionics as Primitive Weapons in the War on Time” in 2006, an article which examines “Urashima Tarō” – an early Japanese tale also dealing with time travel into a distant future. The story was first mentioned in the *Nihongi* (the second most ancient book of classical Japanese history, from around the year 720<sup>18</sup>). The plot goes like this: young fisherman Urashima Taro visits an underwater citadel, where he spends three whole days. Upon his return home, back to his own village, he discovers that he had traveled three hundred years into the future: no one remembers anything about him or his earthly existence, his house has turned to dust, and his family has been dead for centuries.

Similarly, *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* (a 10<sup>th</sup> century Japanese narrative) may very well be regarded as an example of proto-science fiction. Kaguya-hime, the protagonist, is a princess having descended onto Earth right from the Moon, sent here in order to be put out of harm’s way for the duration of a galactic conflict. She is found by a bamboo grower in Japan, who decides to bring her up as his own daughter; she is later on taken back to the Moon by her actual alien family. A manuscript drawing portrays a circular airborne machine resembling a flying saucer. (Fig. 4) The present illustration appeared originally in Matthew Richardson’s 2001 book *The Halstead Treasury of Ancient Science Fiction*.

Moreover, one recurrently quoted text is *True History*, a 2<sup>nd</sup>-century satire by Assyrian-Greek writer Lucian of Samosata, which employs the tropes of a journey to outer space, as well as talks with alien organisms – meant to critique the practice of hyperbole within debates and travel literature. Here, as S.C. Fredericks has shown in his 1976 article “Lucian’s True History as SF”,<sup>19</sup> emblematic SF leitmotifs and topoi comprise the following: encounters with alien beings (including the experience of a first contact event), voyages to outer space, cosmic warfare and planetary colonialism, the theme of gigantism, creatures manufactured by human technology, biospheres functioning according to a series of alternative physical rules, and an outspoken yearning of the hero for exploration and escapades. After witnessing an interplanetary skirmish between the People of the Sun and the People of the Moon for the right to lay claim to and colonize the Morning Star, Lucian depicts colossal space arachnids who were “appointed to spin a web in the air between the Moon and the Morning Star, which was done in an instant, and made a plain campaign upon which the foot forces were planted...”<sup>20</sup> (Fig. 5) L. Sprague de Camp, together with several other authors, claim this to be one of the first – perhaps the very earliest – case of science fiction or what it known as proto-science fiction.<sup>21</sup>

Likewise, fragments of the Bible’s “Revelation” comprise language which is very similar to that related to science fantasy and science fiction in general:

There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.<sup>22</sup>

In British writer and critic Adam Roberts’ 2000 book *Science Fiction: the New Critical Idiom*, the author states the following:

We are not in the habit, perhaps, of thinking of the Bible as science fiction; but in so far as it does provide us with the myths with which our culture encounters Otherness, the label has a certain appropriateness.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, early Indian poetry – the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, for instance, which was written between the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC – includes

Vimana airborne machines capable of traveling under water or even into space, as well as obliterate an entire metropolis by means of highly advanced weaponry. (Fig. 6)

The *Rigveda* collection of Sanskrit hymns – written somewhere between 1700 and 1100 BC – contains in its first book an account of “mechanical birds” that can be observed “jumping into space speedily with a craft using fire and water... containing twelve stamghas (pillars), one wheel, three machines, 300 pivots, and 60 instruments”.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the *Mahabharatha* – the traditional Hindu mythical epic written between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century BC – features the tale of King Revaita, who embarks on a journey to heaven in order to meet the creator himself (Brahma) and, upon returning to Earth, is astonished once he finds out that countless eons had passed since his departure – thus envisioning the notion of faster-than-light time travel.<sup>25</sup>

What must also be emphasized is that scholars interested in studying the early predecessors of the genre need not look any further than the ancient Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh – definitely one of the earliest and most frequently quoted texts –, which is the very first work of chronicled literature known to man, its first versions having been pinpointed to around 2000 BC. One of the most vocal advocates of considering Gilgamesh a definite point of origin for the genre is American science fiction novelist Lester Del Rey, who argues in his 1980 book *The World of Science Fiction, 1926-1976: the History of a Subculture* that “science fiction is precisely as old as the first recorded fiction. That is the Epic of Gilgamesh”. In his turn, French science fiction author Pierre Versins also deems<sup>26</sup> Gilgamesh the original piece of science fiction literature, chiefly because of the manner in which it treats human reason and because it dwells on the pursuit of immortality. Furthermore, Gilgamesh includes a flood scene that, in some respects, bears a certain resemblance to apocalyptic science fiction.

\*

Following this far-reaching, albeit preliminary scan, I asked myself the following question: what if focus wasn't on text, but on specific storytelling intentionality?

For are not all religious promises, in the end, some form of ritualized escapism as well? And isn't science-fiction, in its turn, all but such escapism, anchored only by verisimilitude?

An initial tactic could be remarketing the concept, constructing a certain pattern according to which one could define literature pertaining to a revised, hard definition of SF (not to be mistaken with hard sci-fi!),

by eliminating parasitic work-types as well as searching for and adding several works that commonly and previously were seen as non-SF.

How could we do this? Also, are eschatological, futurological mechanisms of SF and its teleological reflexes enough to make it a cultural vocation?

I propose to begin by articulating a strong SF definition that would go a bit like this: Any narrative work, considered – at any given historical moment – thematically and predominantly about certain aspects or the whole of the future of humankind, be it near or far, utopian or dystopian, that inherently and plausibly challenges the need for a reflex suspension of disbelief.

Or: Repository of scientific hypotheses with limited temporal immunity to falsifiability.

Or simply: Fiction of epistemological risk.

Why? As you may have noticed, only recently, following the industrial revolution and advent of the relativistic paradigm, has SF become *scientific* eschatology. Empirical inductivism has long been decoupled from the scientific method.

But what we can observe, throughout the ages, is that this type of works has always had its fundament on what was conventionally, paradigmatically established and perceived as the known physical world.

My purpose would thus be to establish the dynamics by means of which the process of unraveling eschatological and futurological thinking as a standalone cultural structure can be the key that individuates it as a universal human vocation. Hence we are discussing here the aforementioned *strong* SF – which is not to be confused with *hard* SF which does not necessarily entail realistic speculation about a future world, though its bias is indisputably realistic. On a side note, the latter is the sort of SF that most appeals to scientists themselves—and is often written by them. The typical ‘hard’ SF writer is “always looking for new and unfamiliar scientific theories and discoveries which could provide the occasion for a story, and, at its more didactic extreme, the story is only a framework for introducing the scientific concept to the reader”.<sup>27</sup>

For instance, one way of debastardizing the genre could be by stripping down the definition of SF of its artificially attached subgenres that are typically bloating it, pushing it rather towards an extended, speculative kind of fiction, in order to obtain a more operable vector, and thus changing focus from genre theory (which is swampy, as demonstrated earlier) to structuralist diachronism.

Strictly speaking, this would translate as acknowledging SF as the Deleuzian structure that differs from both concrete reality and abstract ideas – a “third order” that mediates between the two.<sup>28</sup>

Here we must be willing to commit the blasphemous act of imagining and accepting the idea of a diachronic structuralism, because – simply put – the syntagm is an exact mirror, impeccably describing the situation. Identical or similar synchronicities create a chain that forms a diachronic structure.

In other words, I’m pleading for perceiving SF as a kind of Auerbachian mimesis “of things to come”.

For example, reader-response theory values the practice of defining readers in terms of the text (understood here, evidently, as a result of artistic creation), *i.e.*, viewing texts as testimonials of specific mental expectations, varying from one text to the other; thus, meaning is created within the relationship between the text and the reader. A basic acceptance of the meaning of a specific text tends to occur when a group of readers have a shared cultural background and interpret the text in similar ways. In essence, at this point, I feel as though I am undertaking cultural anthropology-related work without even being an anthropologist.

My only hope would be to verify if, in this manner, we could shift the research from “finding extrinsic patterns in SF” to “reading works in an eschatological key”, *i.e.*, pivot from SF as matter towards SF as tool.

This process of shifting the debate enables us to overcome the tension of what Umberto Eco would call an aberrant decoding: we may think past ideas or imagological artifacts are completely fantastical, but, when considering any given paradigm (at any precise moment in history) of objective reality (in other words, an empirical instantiation of a certain worldview consensus) as basis for ideation, these works become science fictional.

For now, along the lines of an article by John Rieder,<sup>29</sup> the only things we can yet say about the entire spectrum of science fiction today are summed up by these points: 1) Science fiction is fluctuating and historical; 2) Science fiction has no single coalescing specificity and no point of incipit; 3) Science fiction is not a category of texts, but rather a manner of using texts and of finding and systemizing connections between them; 4) ascription of the label (and consequently the identity) of science fiction to a work represents an active interference and mediation in and of its reception and circulation.

Actually, the very binomial dynamics of the two terms “science” and “fiction” tells us a great deal about its functioning in relationship to our psyche. Trembling when faced with a grim version of the future, we resort to granting the “fiction” component additional power; however, when our hopes for that same possible future are high, we relish in the unflinching reliability of the “science” label.

Nevertheless, in outlining a fashion in eschatological or futurological works and in using it as an anthropological tool, we could extrapolate a certain psycho-history of human dreads and aspirations, in the hope that SF production and consumption won’t remain a *ballet figé* of narrative therapy.

\*

Other, lingering research paths:

Could we quantify a relationship between science-fictional works and technological advances? Could then a study of imagological SF throughout its heyday years be appropriate? Would a mythopoeic / mythogonic / mythocritique-driven approach be compatible – if not complementary – with this enterprise?

All things considered, what I expect to have accomplished at the end of my research is pinpointing – or rather constructing altogether – a certain genre-transcending, psychosocial *function* of science-fiction, one that consequently establishes this otherwise ostracized cultural phenomenon as a genealogically-recognizable form of art in its own right.

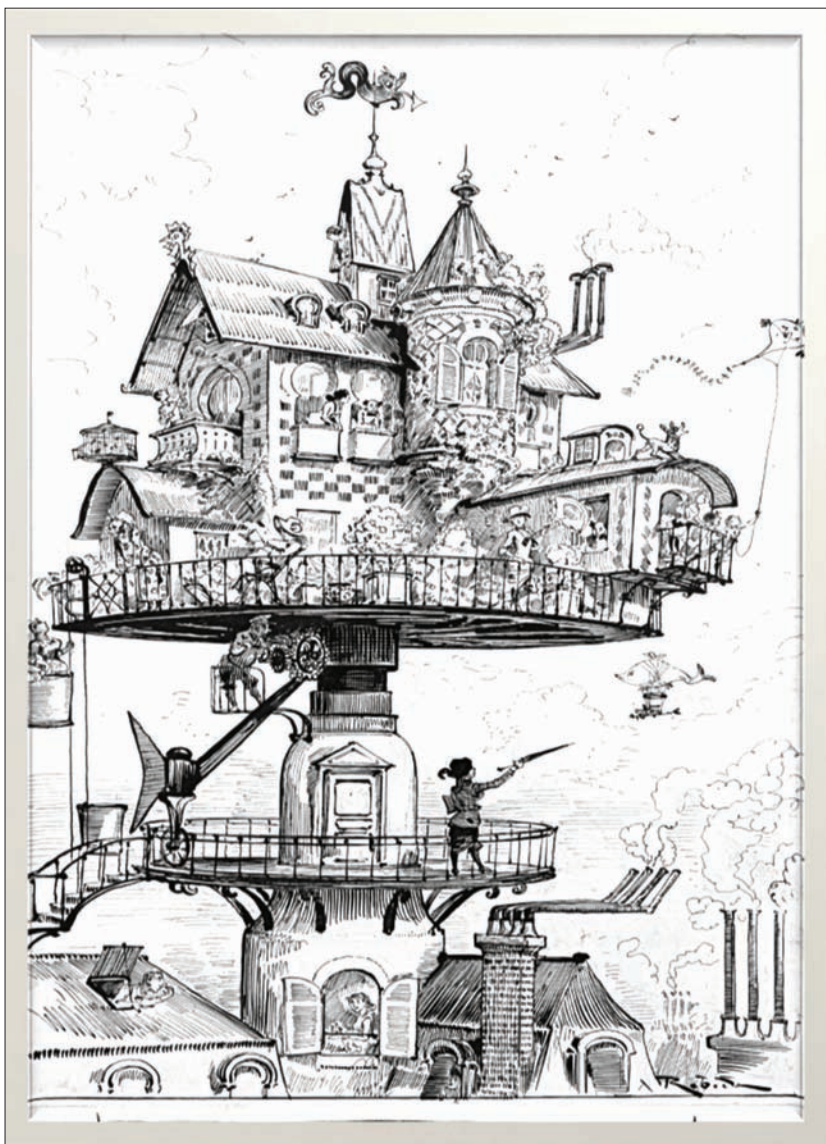


Fig. 1: "Maison tournante aérienne" (aerial rotating house). Illustration by French science fiction writer Albert Robida for his volume *Le Vingtième Siècle*, a 19<sup>th</sup> century idea of life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Portrays a residence that can rotate on a pillar with an airship in the distance (1883).

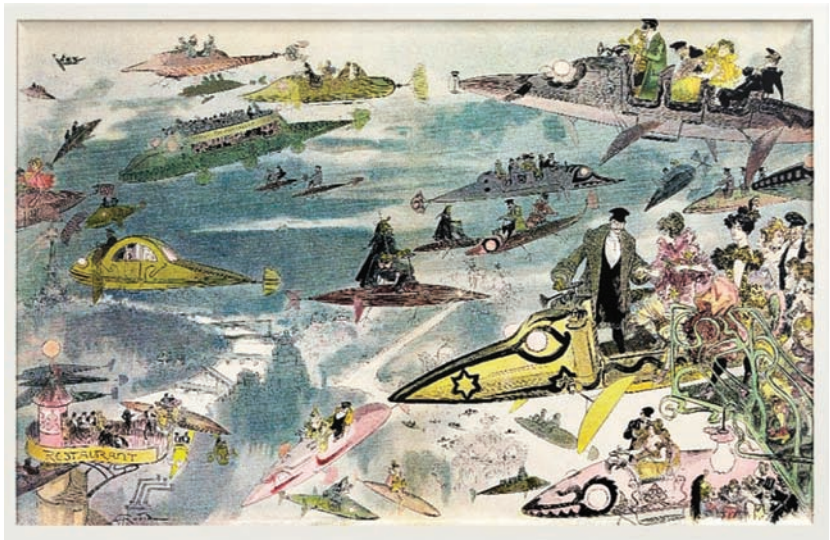


Fig. 2: "Leaving the opera in the year 2000", hand-colored lithograph by Albert Robida (late 19<sup>th</sup> century)



Fig. 3: Illustration of the German translation of Francis Godwin's *The Man in the Moone* (1659).



Fig. 4: Kaguya-hime returning to the Moon in *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*, Tosa Horomichi (circa 1650).



Fig. 5: Aubrey Beardsley illustration of Lucian's interplanetary giant spider battle from *True History* (1898).

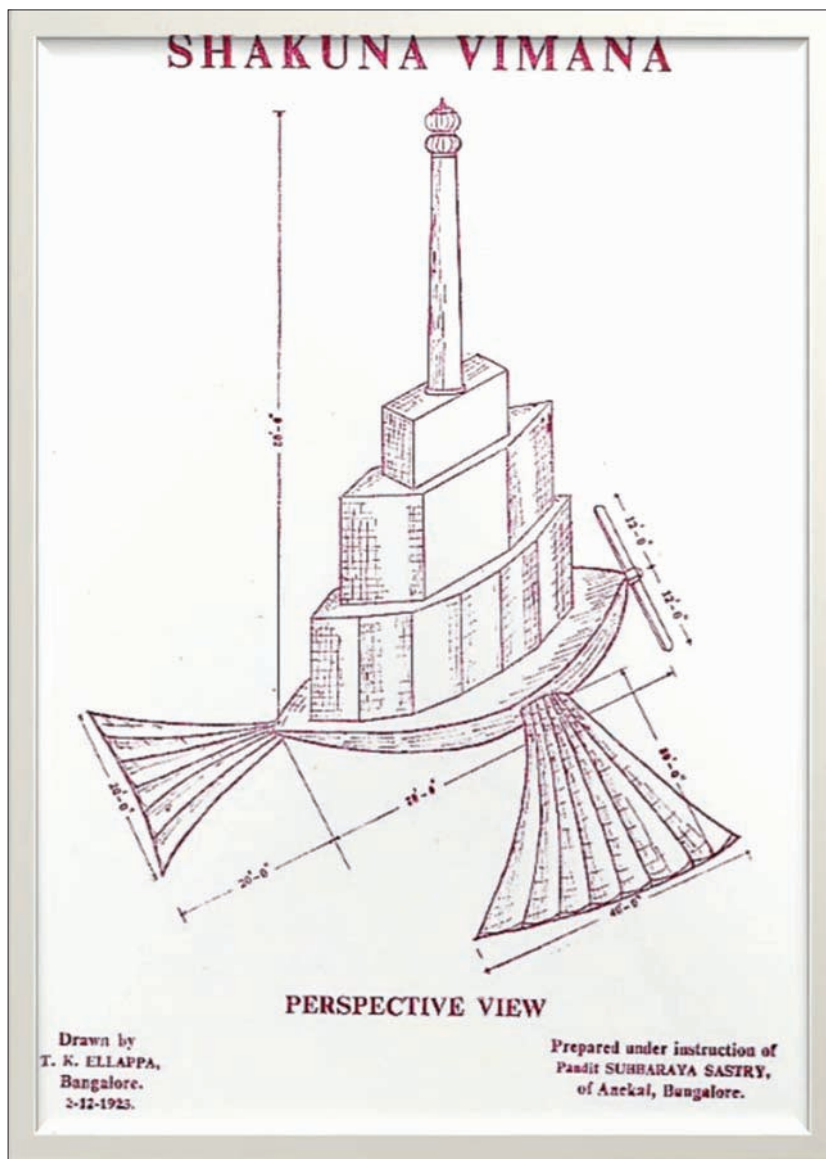


Fig. 6: Depiction of the Shakuna Vahana (1923).

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> White, Hayden, "Interpretation in History", in *New Literary History*, 4 (Winter, 1973), pp. 281-314.
- <sup>2</sup> *Idem*, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality", *Critical Inquiry*, No. 1 (Autumn, 1980), pp. 5-27.
- <sup>3</sup> Shippey, Tom, "Literary Gatekeepers and the Fabril Tradition", in *Science Fiction, Canonization, Marginalization, and the Academy*, Greenwood Press, 2002, p. 8.
- <sup>4</sup> One example of such influx is the phenomenon of the Star Wars franchise, which hardcore SF fans consider to be mere fantasy in space.
- <sup>5</sup> Lethem, Jonathan, "Close Encounters: The Squandered Promise of Science Fiction", *Village Voice*, June 1998; Also reprinted in a slightly expanded version under the title "Why Can't We All Live Together?: A Vision of Genre Paradise Lost", in *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, September 1998, Number 121, Vol. 11, No. 1.
- <sup>6</sup> Van Gelder, Gordon, "Editorial", in *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, October/November 1998.
- <sup>7</sup> Barnett, David, "Gaiman's Choice: Shouldn't Good Writing Tell a Story Too?", in *The Guardian*, London, June 23, 2010.
- <sup>8</sup> *Idem*, "Science Fiction: the Genre that Dare Not Speak Its Name", in *The Guardian*, London, January 28, 2009.
- <sup>9</sup> Bleiler, Everett K., *Science Fiction: The Early Years*, Kent State University Press, 1990, p. xi.
- <sup>10</sup> Brin, David, *Through Stranger Eyes*, Nimble Books, 2008.
- <sup>11</sup> See his interview in the 13<sup>th</sup> of November 1980 issue of *Christian Science Monitor*.
- <sup>12</sup> Niven, Larry, *Scatterbrain*, Tom Doherty Associates, New York, 2003, p. 311
- <sup>13</sup> Clarke, Arthur C., *Greetings, Carbon Based Bipeds!: Collected Essays*, St. Martins Press, New York, 1999.
- <sup>14</sup> Mendelsohn, Farah, in *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*, Issue 88, 2003.
- <sup>15</sup> Knight, Damon, in "Science Fiction Adventures", *Science Fiction Adventures* (1952 magazine), No. 1, Chicago, p. 122.
- <sup>16</sup> One must know that in the 1970's, at the time of this quote, Campbell was a godlike behemoth editor of SF.
- <sup>17</sup> Dr. Abu Shadi Al-Roubi, "Ibn al-Nafis as a philosopher", in *Symposium on Ibn al-Nafis*, Second International Conference on Islamic Medicine, 1982.
- <sup>18</sup> Rosenberg, Donna, *Folklore, Myths, and Legends: A World Perspective*, McGraw Hill Professional, 1997.
- <sup>19</sup> Fredericks, S.C., "Lucian's True History as SF", in *Science Fiction Studies*, No. 8, Vol. 3, 1976

- <sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.
- <sup>21</sup> Grewell, Greg, "Colonizing the Universe: Science Fictions Then, Now, and in the (Imagined) Future", in *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, Vol. 55, No. 2, 2001; Swanson, Roy Arthur, "The True, the False, and the Truly False: Lucian's Philosophical Science Fiction", in *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3, Nov. 1976; Georgiadou, Aristoula and Larmour, David H.J., "Lucian's Science Fiction Novel True Histories. Interpretation and Commentary", in *Mnemosyne Supplement*, No. 179, Leiden, 1998.
- <sup>22</sup> <http://www.biblica.com/bibles/chapter/?verse=Revelation+6&version=niv>
- <sup>23</sup> Roberts, Adam Charles. *Science Fiction*. Psychology Press, 2000, p. 49.
- <sup>24</sup> Mukunda, H.S.; Deshpande, S.M., Nagendra, H.R. ; Prabhu, A., and Govindraju, S.P., in "A critical study of the work 'Vyamanika Shastra'", Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, 1976
- <sup>25</sup> Gibbs, Laura, "Revati", dictionary article in *Encyclopedia for Epics of Ancient India*, 2007.
- <sup>26</sup> Vas-Deyres, Natacha; Atallah, Marc, "Pierre Versins et L'Encyclopédie de l'utopie, de la science-fiction et des voyages extraordinaires", in *Res Futurae*, Juillet 2012.
- <sup>27</sup> Parrinder, Patrick, *Science Fiction: Its Criticism and Teaching*, New Accents, London, 1980, p. 15.
- <sup>28</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, "How Do We Recognise Structuralism?", in *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953-1974*, Semiotext(e), 2002.
- <sup>29</sup> Rieder, John, *On Defining SF, or Not: Genre Theory, SF, and History*, in *Science Fiction Studies*, No. 111, Volume 37, Part 2, July 2010.

## References:

- Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies*, Ed. Du Seuil, Paris, 1957
- Booker, M. Keith, *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism*, Greenwood Press, 1994
- Bourdieu, Pierre, *The Field of Cultural Production*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1993
- Broderick, Damien, *Transrealist Fiction: Writing in the Slipstream of Science*, Greenwood Press, 2000
- Dinello, Daniel, *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology*, University of Texas Press, 2005
- Everman, Welch, *Cult Science Fiction Films*, Citadel Press, 1995
- Greenland, Colin, Rabkin, Eric S., Slusser, George E., *Storm Warnings: Science Fiction Confronts the Future*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1987
- Hall, Stuart; Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (eds.), *Encoding/Decoding*, in *Media And Cultural Studies: Keyworks*, 2001
- Haney li, William S., *Cyberculture, Cyborgs and Science Fiction: Consciousness and the Posthuman*, Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2006
- Hohendahl, Peter Uwe. "Introduction to Reception Aesthetics". In *New German Critique* 10, 1977
- Holub, Robert C., *Crossing Borders: Reception Theory, Poststructuralism, Deconstruction*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992
- Iaccino, James F., *Jungian Reflections within the Cinema: A Psychological Analysis of Sci-Fi and Fantasy Archetypes*, Praeger, Westport, 1998
- Iser, Wolfgang, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1978
- Jauss, Hans Robert, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Trans. Timothy Bahti. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1982
- Landon, Brooks, *The Aesthetics of Ambivalence: Rethinking Science Fiction Film in the Age of Electronic (Re)production*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1992
- McConnell, Frank, *Storytelling and Mythmaking*, Oxford University Press, 1979
- Milner, Andrew, *Tales of Resonance and Wonder: Science Fiction and Genre Theory*, *Extrapolation*, Vol. 51, No. 1
- Milner, Andrew, *Locating Science Fiction*, Liverpool University Press, 2013
- Perrine, Toni A., *Film and the nuclear age: representing cultural anxiety*, Routledge, 1998
- Philmus, Robert M., *Visions and Revisions: (Re)Constructing Science Fiction*, University of Liverpool Press, 2005
- Pinsky, Michael, *Future Present: Ethics and/as Science Fiction*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, 2003
- Rabkin, Eric S., *Mindscapes: The Geographies of Imagined Worlds*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1989

- Rabkin, Eric S., Slusser, George E., *Aliens: The Anthropology of Science Fiction*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1987
- Rabkin, Eric S., Slusser, George E., *Hard Science Fiction*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1986
- Reilly, Robert, *The Transcendent Adventure: Studies of Religion in Science Fiction/Fantasy*, Greenwood press, Westport, 1985
- Rickman, Gregg, *The Science Fiction Film Reader*, Limelight Ed., 2004
- Roberts, Adam, *Science Fiction*, Routledge, London, 2000
- Sobchack, Vivian Carol, *Screening space: The American science fiction film*, Rutgers University Press, 1997
- Spinrad, Norman, *Science Fiction in the Real World*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1990
- Telotte, J.P., *Science fiction film*, Cambridge University Press, 2001
- Thiher, Allen, *Fiction Refracts Science: Modernist Writers from Proust to Borges*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia, 2005
- Tompkins, Jane P. (ed.) *Reader-response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-structuralism*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1980
- Vieth, Errol, *Screening Science: Context, Text and Science in Fifties Science Fiction Film*, Scarecrow Press, London, 2001
- Westfahl, Gary, *Science Fiction, Children's Literature, and Popular Culture: Coming of Age in Fantasyland*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 2000
- Yuen, Wong Kin, Westfahl, Gary, Kit-Sze Chan, Amy, *World Weavers: Globalization, Science Fiction, and the Cybernetic Revolution*, Hong Kong University Press, 2005
- Various academic journals of science-fiction studies (*Extrapolation*, *Foundation – The International Review of Science Fiction*, *Science Fiction Studies*, *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, etc.)