CHAPTER 27

Thinking Worlds of a Liminal Shintoist Cybermarxist: Five Interviews (1987–1995)

An Interview with Takayuki Tatsumi (1984)

Note 2020: This interview by Takayuki Tatsumi, then a graduate student at Cornell University, was taped on December 28, 1984, at the Washington Sheraton Hotel for a Japanese SF magazine. In it, I became uncomfortably aware of a gap, perhaps generational: I simply was not sure what this very bright youngster meant by the opposition of "world view" and "world mechanics," or by esthetics.

TATSUMI: Part of your *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* has already been translated into Japanese and many critics there have been influenced by your critical system. Therefore, it would be useful if you could inform your Japanese audience of what you are currently thinking about SF, SF criticism, and SF academics.

Your definition of SF is "cognitive estrangement." It is fascinating because the concept springs from Brecht's theory of drama, which was your earlier major interest and is the topic in one of your newest books, *To Brecht and Beyond* (1984). On the other hand, I notice that you begin *Metamorphoses* with a very strict generic definition of SF. How do you conceive the generic relationship between SF and drama?

SUVIN: OK, now we are talking only about the "estrangement" factor or effect, a concept first introduced by the Russian Formalists and later developed further by Brecht. But then, I think, this concept, although particularly clear in theatre, is in fact of m ore general, cultural and potential usefulness. If it were not, obviously I should not have applied it to SF. Although I didn't quite know what I was doing when I was using this concept, why I was using it, I could give you a theoretical justification today. It is caught up with what both the SF community and also

logicians in their latest investigations call "Possible Worlds." As you may know, this is a concept now discussed in semiotics by people like Eco and so on. A "Possible World" is a little spacetime island which is in some ways complete in itself, rounded off and set off against other possible worlds – which applies equally in the Einsteinian physical system, in logics, and in literary theory. Now a play, including its performances, is clearly a little rounded-off world. And obviously SF is also, within the epic mode and the novel, that form which usually most clearly represents a different Possible World. Therefore, there are some strong internal and formal – even formalizable – kinships between SF and drama, because both are Possible Worlds. And by pure luck, being a theatre critic to begin with and then a theoretician of drama, I stumbled onto this idea of estrangement: the new world makes the audience world strange. But as you know, the Russian Formalists developed it in analyses of the novel – on Sterne, Tolstoy, and so on. So it's not confined to drama: I simply happened to have gotten it from Brecht.

T: Doesn't this mean that you have noticed an essential connection between the form of SF and the form of drama?

S: I didn't know why I was using it. I just intuitively used it – in the 50s when I began writing in Yugoslavia and then in the 60s in English. But now I could give you a theoretical, semiotic defense of that, based on the notion of Possible Worlds.

T: O.K. And yet, my opinion is that, as far as the genre of SF is concerned, the very concept of "world" is binary – "world view" and/or "world mechanics." Do you understand?

S: No. Explain, please. Do you mean any particular work, or the whole genre together?

T: For example, if we appreciate Clarke's *Childhood's End* very much, we must agree with his "world view." On the other hand, if we appreciate Lem's *Solaris* very much, we are fascinated by its "world mechanics."

S: Do you mean the way he describes the world – the Ocean in Solaris and all that? Is that what you mean?

T: Put simply, there are, I think, at least a couple of ways of reading SF. One is a reading on the basis of "world view," that is, "ideology," while the other on the basis of "world mechanics," namely, "law."

s: For me the distinction you established only goes so far. That is to say, it may be an analytically useful distinction, but all analytically useful distinctions break down after a certain stretch of use. So, if you want to understand any work of SF, of course you have to begin with what you call world mechanics – spacetime, the plot developing in this spacetime, the narrative agents, and everything else. But then, the spacetime is always a choice among possibilities. The text may say "there is a blue sun," which means "there is a blue, but not yellow, sun." Even if the author says only "blue," for us yellow is normal and we translate it as "blue, but not yellow."

Therefore we are not in the Solar System. "Blue sun" is a choice among possible sun colours and systems, from which a lot will then follow: a type of planet atmosphere, climate, geology, and so on. But, then, these "mechanics" really begin to serve as a delineation of a possible world, which is made up by choices of what to show and what not to show, what to focus on and what to leave on the periphery. That choice is an ideological choice, and at that moment the distinction between mechanics and ideology breaks down.

Now I can appreciate up to a limited point *Childhood's End*, let's say (since you mentioned it); but I don't have to agree with Clarke's ideology, which is a kind of English Non-conformist mysticism. I don't have to agree with this ideology in order to be able to read the book. I can say his ideology has certain limits, and I'm willing to follow him up to his limits; but then, I would not like to stop at his limits, going no further. Therefore, I will not accept this book as a final value statement. So, I find two matters here: one is a technical matter, while the other is a value decision. Technically, you can't read the book longer than three sentences before mechanics begins to interfere with value, choices, ideology, and so on. Ideologically, I absolutely refuse to be bound by the ideology of any particular writer. Moreover, I think it is bad, very pernicious, when SF becomes an ideology for the subculture of SF fans. Then they become a kind of sect which can be manipulated for semi-political, semi-religious ends, and this does happen to SF fans as we know, unfortunately. And the healthy attitude is that you have your own point of view, an ideology which is based on your life experience and which can be, then, in a dialogue with the ideology of the novel by Lem or the novel by Clarke. Maybe you can learn something from

them and change a part of your ideology. Maybe you cannot – in which case, you simply say, "I don't like this ideology."

T: In that case, you don't recognise any possibility of misreading?

S: Oh, of course. I'm assuming that you are a careful reader, and I was speaking about the case of the ideal reader. Even then, you cannot say that in order to be an ideal reader I must agree with Clarke. I don't see why. I must understand what he said, but I can also say I disagree.

T: The reason I'm asking this question is that you yourself are using some twofold structure in writing your *Metamorphoses*, trying to combine or fuse poetics with history. Here we cannot mistake your effort to dialectically unite the formal and the historical aspects of SF, and what I meant by the term "world mechanics" is quite similar to your "formalism."

S: But I would not totally agree with your analogy between an explicit work of conceptual theory, such as my book, and a work of fiction, which is not an explicit, formalised conceptualisation, but rather is more akin to a metaphor or a parable – a developed metaphor or a sustained parable. By the way, I don't defend the structure of *Metamorphoses* too much. It would have been better not to divide it into two parts, but I didn't know how to manage it at the time.

T: Let me ask again, more intelligibly: what did you try to do in that book, using poetics and history – mere combination?

S: More exactly, juxtaposition. The idea at the back of my mind was taken from the distinction in linguistics between syntagmatic flow and paradigmatic overview. I want you to know the history of how this was written. I first had some kind of overview idea and wrote a theoretical essay. Then I wrote a historical sketch about the flow – both of these in Yugoslavia. Then, thinking more about theory, I wrote the first three chapters of theory. Then I wrote the historical part, which is based on definitions from the first three chapters. And when I finished all that, I wrote the fourth chapter of theory, "Science Fiction as Novum." That's the way the book was written – after which I wrote the Preface, of course.

If you want to see the way I would do it now, you should look at my book *Victorian Science Fiction in the United Kingdom*, whose last 200 pages show no (or at least much less) division between poetics and history. There

are some preliminary discussions of what a social addressee is, what narrative logic is, and so on, in order to clarify the terminology. That work is more homogenous and applied to only one particular socio historical phase; it attempts a Williamsian social theory of literature – for one genre, in one historical period.

Furthermore, if my book *Metamorphoses* ever gets translated in its entirety in Japan, I hope they would include a new theoretical essay which I have published, in English, in *Métaphores* no. 9/10 (1984), a special issue devoted to papers given at a colloquium on SF held in Nice in 1983. My essay is called "Science Fiction: Metaphor, Parable, and Chronotope"; as you can see, it is influenced by Bakhtin especially and ends with an analysis of a story by Cordwainer Smith, "The Lady Who Sailed *The Soul*."

T: One of his anthologies was recently translated into Japanese, and succeeded in giving rise to a lot of Cordwainer Smith "maniacs."

S: Well, I have all kinds of doubts about Cordwainer Smith, because he was ideologically a very strange person. He was a CIA expert on psychological warfare, for Asia especially – a specialist on Indonesia, China, and whatever. Nonetheless, or because of that, I find him very representative of US ideology, especially today.

T: How do you connect Cordwainer Smith with US ideology?

S: Cordwainer Smith is today in a very privileged position because the ideology he represents in some idealised pure ways is the ideology that came to dominate America with Reagan. He was eccentric in his own time, but today he can serve very well to elucidate something central within the USA. But, by the way, I'm not saying that Cordwainer Smith is the same as Reagan: as Marx said, Rousseau is not the same as a normal petty bourgeois but, nonetheless, he is the ideal and theoretical representative of the petty bourgeois. I can substantiate my claim about Cordwainer Smith by my analysis of that story of his.

T: Are you now talking in an ironical sense?

S: No, no, Smith/Linebarger meant this to be so. For instance, his heroine is called Helen America – she is an allegorical heroine. She is saved by the apparition of an unknown lover, which is obviously a transposition of the Christian idea of heavenly bride and bridegroom, Christ who comes to save America.

T: But I think Cordwainer Smith has usually been grasped from the viewpoint of esthetics.

S: I don't believe there is esthetics outside of ideology.

T: This is just what has confused me very much in your system. Although you are dealing with writers like Lem, Dick, and Cordwainer Smith, who all seem to me quite esthetic, your book itself excludes such writers, emphasizing the ideological tradition from More down to Čapek.

S: Well, first of all the book had to stop sometime. It had become very long, so I stopped at the point of Wells and a couple of things after Wells. I was hoping to go on, but didn't manage.

T: But, as a reader, I hope you would propose a total vision of the New Wave and after, because the New Wave served as the first esthetic movement in SF.

S: By New Wave you mean whom: Harlan Ellison, or Thomas Disch? Or – ?

T: J.G. Ballard in particular.

S: To answer your question, let me first say that I'm presently writing not about SF but about literary theory, theatre, and culture. So I doubt if I shall ever give you a general overview of SF – fortunately. I say fortunately in large part because I'm very unhappy about the general turn of events in the last 10 years of SF in the US, which is the dominant power in world SF. (I'm also unhappy about the general turn of events in Russian SF, by the way.) Given that unhappiness, what I could write about US SF would be negative and ironical, with some exceptions – Disch, much Delany, early Russ, Piercy, some Bishop perhaps, etc. It would not be pleasant either for me to write or for the reader to read a book which would be 90 % negative or ironical. I prefer to do other things.

As far as the New Wave writers are concerned, they no doubt brought in some interesting things – notably a concentration on psychology, which had been much neglected in SF, though I think SF cannot have the nineteenth century's Balzac-Tolstoy type of psychology. Therefore I disagree with Ursula Le Guin, who thinks it should have – I think it cannot have that kind of psychology by definition. The New Wave brought in a number

of tricks (devices, if you want a nicer term), which were useful and renewed the genre some. But these attitudes or devices basically seem to me the photographic negative of attitudes used by people like Asimov. That is to say, Asimov, Heinlein, and their ilk love technology, while the New Wave hates technology, a phenomenon already prefigured in some earlier writers like Bradbury or Simak. Asimov and Heinlein write a utilitarian radio-mechanics kind of prose, while the New Wave people write a buoyant, purple and decadent, *fin de siècle* type of prose. Yet if you react to somebody, you are still conditioned by that somebody. You are just a photographic negative and she or he is a positive, or vice versa. So, I refuse to take sides in a battle between the older writers and the New Wave, because each side has good aspects as well as bad aspects. Finally it's a family quarrel: they all coexist in the same subculture and the same magazines, some of which, nevertheless, liked to specialize in one side more than in the other. But people like Asimov and Heinlein got the message and stuffed in passages about sex, usually in very silly ways. All in all, that was a storm in a teacup really.

T: How about the post-New Wave writers?

S: I would really prefer not to discuss the last ten years because I have not been reading systematically, with some exceptions – most of whom are people not printed in SF magazines. I really don't think I am competent to talk about this period.

T: Then, the next question. Attending your last lecture, "William Morris and the Science Fiction of the 1880s," I was astonished at your employing even "deconstruction."

S: In quotation marks, as you might remember. I'm not a follower of deconstructionism.

T: But you have apparently used Formalism and Structuralism, being very conscious of their methodologies. If the very act of reading, writing about, and/or criticizing SF cannot be separated from methodology, don't you find validity even in Post-Structuralist poetics?

S: Any critic uses whatever method he or she can find in order to understand and elucidate a text. No method should be forbidden. Some

methods give better results with some texts than with others. Would you apply Deconstruction to Gernsback? On the other hand, there is less difficulty applying it to Delany, because there is an inner kinship.

T: You mean *Dhalgren*?

S: If you read *Dhalgren*, for example, there you can find a pre-Derridean deconstruction of New York City (Bellona). But personally, I suppose that the method which suits me best is what I would today describe as some kind of socio-historical semiotics, which tries to do better what I already started in *Metamorphoses*: fusing the formal and the socio-historical. That will be my approach: let everybody else use whatever they want, and I wish them luck. But I wouldn't use the distinction you mentioned at the beginning, and I would even have some ideological objections to some methods.

T: How, then, do you define the role of language in SF? Because Post-Structuralist poetics as well as Formalist methods seem quite useful to highlight the linguistic aspect of the genre.

S: Much too little work has been done on that, partly because SF was usually very shoddily written on the level of sentence – which is the level of linguistic inquiry. SF became tolerable on the level of paragraph and very interesting on the level of chapter, but was usually very bad on the level of sentence. But with the advent of Lem, Delany, Le Guin, and so on, this is no longer true. Now we can begin seriously talking about the stylistics of SF, even that of E.R. Burroughs if you wish, who is a reasonably brisk writer on the level of sentence. But there are other language aspects connected with SF – for example, neologisms; and in general, how does language form very different Possible Worlds? That should be a privileged theme of investigation, probably by other people.

T: I quite agree with you. By emphasizing the poetics of SF, did you think it is possible to cognitively estrange your own history of SF itself? With this question, I'm asking you whether you can apply your definition of SF even to your own socio-historical methodology.

S: I think that is a very intelligent and very witty question. I have never thought about this. But I suppose that when the subject defines an object, she or he also auto-defines her or himself.

T: You mean a self-referential system?

S: Unconsciously. It's unconsciously self-referential. Yes, I'm interested in cognition and in estrangement, and the book is done that way. Yes, you're absolutely right, and that was a very interesting question [*laughs*].

T: Let me ask one last question. Are you an academician or a critic?

S: I guess I'm both. I work in archives and write with a lot of footnotes sometimes, and I also wrote theatre criticism in circumstances where I went to the theatre in the evening and at noon next day the critique had to be in a newspaper office. So, I did both, and I don't feel uncomfortable in either.

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SF and Theater: An Interview by Yamada Kazuko (1987)

KAZUKO **YAMADA**[1]: I'd like to introduce you to general readers, not only to SF readers, because you are famous as a critic of SF, drama and theatre, social matters, and so on. My first question is to you as an SF critic. You wrote a big book, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, published in 1979, where you saw SF from a historical and social point of view. Would you tell me where your view of SF basically came from?

DARKO SUVIN: Well, this is going to get a bit autobiographical, if you don't mind. The basic formative influences on my life were the Second

1 Kazuko Yamada quit a course in German literature at Keio University, Tokyo, to become editor of *NW-SF*, the quarterly magazine dedicated to introducing New Wave SF to Japanese readers, founded by Koichi Yamano, writer, critic, and famous researcher of the pedigrees of thoroughbreds (his essay on British SF as viewed from Japan appeared in *Foundation* 30). From 1980 to 1985 Ms. Yamada surveyed SF severely for the weekly review paper, *Shukan Dokushojin*, which organized the following interview and printed part of it. She has translated Ursula Le Guin 's *City of Illusions* and, in collaboration, *The Languages of the Night*, also Dick's *Time Out of Joint,* Anna Kavan's *Ice*, and other titles. The Japanese version of the interview, conducted in Tokyo, December 1987, was published in *Dokushojin* for February 22, 1988. [Note by *Foundation* editors, except for the last sentence]

World War and the revolution in Yugoslavia. At that time, I was a boy of 11–15, not too small not to remember and understand what was happening, and anyway children grow up very quickly when they have to. Both were very favourable for imagining alternative worlds, because the war was so bad that you had to imagine something different and the revolution was so exciting that it was easy to imagine something different.

Y: Certainly. (*laughs*)

S: In fact, it required, it made it necessary to imagine different things. And immediately after the war, in the 40s, I read a lot of both Wells and utopias. Then, when I was a student, in the early 50s, the first SF anthologies began circulating in Yugoslavia. At that time I was in a group of friends in Zagreb, who are now a famous poet, a writer, a theatre director, etc., and if somebody somehow managed to get a book – for example, the big Groff Conklin anthology – it was lent to everyone, it circulated. For me, as you have seen in that book, SF means an exploration of alternative possibilities and therefore, while I see great historical differences between utopian fiction and SF, I think they are members of the same family, so to speak – SF is maybe a niece of utopia, or a daughter, who is usually ashamed of its family. In the 60s, this was not shameful, but now it is not fashionable to think of them together. Utopia is basically a radical difference in a socio-political organization, and SF is a radical difference in anything – cosmology, biology, technology, including socio-political organization. So strictly speaking, my theoretical argument is that utopian fiction is that part of SF concentrating exclusively on socio-political organization.

Y: It's extremely logical . . . (*laughs*)

S: That's theoretically speaking, not historically speaking. Therefore I have in my book, at the beginning, four theoretical chapters, one of which is about utopian fiction. Of course, utopian fiction would include dystopia, I don't care whether the situation is better or worse. I mean I do care personally, ideologically, but theoretically I don't care (*laughs*), as long as the narrative is concentrated on a socio-political organization, whether it is William Morris or "The New Maps of Hell" as Kingsley Amis called them. And anyway, I think that beginning with people like Morris and Wells, it's impossible any more to write a classical utopia which is fixed,

once and forever – as a country which exists, you just discover it. Now utopia becomes a dynamic situation. If it's a dynamic situation, the dynamics in our epoch come often from science and technology. So it becomes increasingly difficult to say whether, for example, *Martian Time-Slip* by Philip Dick is dystopia or SF. What is *The Dispossessed* by Ursula Le Guin; is it utopia or SF? It is both. And what is Thomas Disch masterpiece *334*, is it dystopia or SF? It is both. Therefore I think that in fact the level, the maturity of SF can be measured in various ways, but among other things by how much it is not simply a technological extrapolation, or, of course, as in Heinlein, simply a reproduction of USA in space, or as in van Vogt, simply a mindless adventure thrill (*laughs*).

While I have nothing against technology, and nothing against adventure, I think the maturity of SF is measured by how much it can connect human relationships and technology with sociopolitical organization. Because I think that sociopolitical organization, whether we like it or not, is the modern form of destiny. The big international companies, governments, armies, wars, revolutions, this is our form of destiny, of *kami*, so to speak – maybe good, maybe bad, we could have a debate. So this is where my interest in SF comes from. I don't believe that SF is an empty game, in a sense that chess or bridge are empty games, which do not relate to anything else, they are simply formal exercises. SF is certainly an exercise in imagination: but it also has some relation to what is happening in our lives. It is a very complicated relationship, not straightforward, not one-to-one. I think the proper technical word is a metamorphic relation, where you change faces, you change forms, but still finally there is some kind of relationship, maybe as a parable. Is that an answer to your question?

Y: Yes, I understood well and learned much, thank you. But there are many other SFs today which do not have much close relationship to socio-political matters. What do you think of such kind of SF?

S: For example?

Y: Say, like cyberpunks. I'd like very much to ask you about today's young SF writers, especially those called cyberpunks. For me their works do not seem to have much relationship to utopia or dystopia.

S: Well, I'd really not like to be misunderstood. I tried to stress that I don't think culture and literature, as different from journalism, operates in general by direct simple reference. In journalism, if you say Mr. Takeshita, you mean Mr. Takeshita, but in literature, if you say "a great dictator", you can mean anybody and everybody. It is not so clear, it is not so simple. What I want to say is that in a final instance, after many many mediations, all significant literature – not what I've read of John Jakes or Dean Koontz, but Heinlein, Pohl, Dick, Le Guin, Disch, Gibson, Cherryh, whoever – finally say something about possible human relationships today.

Y: That's right.

S: Even if it is an alien race derived from lions, as in C.J. Cherryh. Some SF species may be methane breathing, but finally the story is about us, not about realities but about possibilities existing today, as a mental game, as a kind of a chess game plus semantics. The relationships in Cherryh's *Chanur* trilogy are clearly something like power relationships possible, imaginable today on Earth, political power-relationships between very different cultures which are contaminated a little bit by biological difference but this is just a literary pretense. I don't necessarily think that direct reference to sociopolitical events is better than a round-about, indirect one. Sometimes a direct reference is very good, as in Le Guin, or in the early and best Dick of the early 60s, or in early Pohl, or in William Tenn. But you can have very indirect reference. The *Left Hand of Darkness* by Le Guin is very indirect, it is about an androgynous race and so on, but it is finally something about the roles of maleness and femaleness, which was on the social agenda of USA in 1968–69 when Le Guin wrote it. The indirectness is part of the fun I like, this is why it is literature, not journalism. So I don't wish to be understood at all as saying that I need direct propaganda. Sometimes direct propaganda is very good; for example Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* is direct feminist propaganda, a very good agitprop novel.

Y: I see – agitation and propaganda novel.

S: The agitprop novel is a recognized literary genre in Europe at least, though they had it in USA during the New Deal: *The Grapes of Wrath* by Steinbeck is a kind of New Deal, Rooseveltian agitprop novel (*laughs*), and even more clearly so is Hemingway *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. So

sometimes this can be good, sometimes it is very bad like Russ's *The Two of Us*.

Y: Do you think Russ's *The Two of Us* is bad?

S: Yes, because I don't agree with the ideology she is propagating in it, which is to kill the male: I don't want to be killed, sorry (*laughs*).

Y: Absolutely! – I guess (*laughs*).

S: Furthermore, to comply with the ideological goal, which is rather unnatural, Russ has to force the plot in unnatural ways too. But *The Female Man* is brilliant, I think, wittily angry, and I would strongly defend it. In sum, sometimes a more or less direct reference is very good but it is absolutely not indispensable. It depends on a historical moment and on the writer, on his/her talent.

Y: Yes I understand. But the world has changed drastically in the last twenty years. So the works of young writers today, say of cyberpunk – how much power could their works have today? I think the reason why Russ or Le Guin could make their thoughts on feminist SF clear was because the world was moving on a global scale in those days. But since then, the world has become more and more static. The dynamics of the times, of the fictions, have almost been lost. In such days, fiction, SF, should be much different from the 60s or 70s …

S: Of course, the relationship of the writer to his time is the relationship of fish to water. If the water changes, some species of fish will die out, some will evolve, and some will manage to survive.

Now obviously there was a historical break somewhere around 1973 and 1974, first in the USA and then in the rest of the world, where the movement of the Left, the Civil Rights, Vietnam protest movements, etc., gave way to a movement of the Right, culminating in Reaganism, Thatcherism, monetarism, and all that stuff. To my mind both periods were very dynamic. I don't think this is a static period: it is the period of the offensive of the big monopolies. In this period, new information techniques, especially computer techniques, are being used. And this is what the best cyberpunk people are writing about.[2] No doubt the cyberpunk movement has a whole

2 On the question discussed here see now Suvin, "Reflections on Gibson and 'Cyberpunk' SF", written during the next visit to Tokyo (June 1988), forthcoming in *Hayakawa SF Magazine* in Ms. Yamada's translation, and in *Foundation*.

spectrum of qualities. There are a few passable writers, there are some imitators, and the best, a really good writer, is, in my opinion, William Gibson.

I think that US SF after 1973 is a desert, Sahara, Gobi, with two little series of oases. The first series is feminist SF, which is clearly such because the only progressive movement that has continued to exist from the 1960s has been feminism. There are some contradictions inside the feminist movement, there are various wings within it, and so on, but on the whole it is, from where I stand, a positive movement, and membership of that movement has provided enough readers to sustain feminist SF, and also enough ideological impetus when everything else collapsed. It is, however, only a partly positive movement, nothing is ever 100 percent pure. I don't think all of feminist SF is good: as I told you, I don't like Russ's *The Two of Us*, it's sectarian …

The second partly good movement is the cyberpunk one, or perhaps mainly William Gibson, in my opinion for two reasons. First of all, because it gives us a new vocabulary of the information interfaces. By the way, it is often located in Japan, Gibson talks often about Shinjuku, Shibuya, Chiba prefecture, he has a thing about "Chiba City" in particular, but it is a *gaijin* visitor's view of Japan all the same, it is very similar to what I would know of Japan. Still, it is better than nothing, because the Americans were so isolationist in the 1930s and 1940s, Heinlein and Asimov then knew nothing except the USA: in the meantime, they have learned something at least about international airports (*laughs*). Well, this kind of youth culture is much better than nothing. So Gibson, for example, has provided a largely new vocabulary. It is very important to refresh the vocabulary of literature. That's number one.

Number two: I think what Gibson personally especially gives us – not everybody else, not Sterling and so on – is thematically Romeo and Juliet in a world of *zaibatsu*, of big software monopolies. There is always a love story, almost like love suicide in a Bunraku play. The world is shown very well, it's a cruel world, it's a killing world, it's a world full of information technology, it's a world where everybody is on dope, it's a world where the only values are sexual love plus cyberspace. So far, so good. My problem with Gibson begins with the word "only" – that erotics and computer hacking are the only values. This is too defeatist for my taste. His protagonists are in the line of Raymond Chandler, or nearer, in the line of P.K. Dick: the little

man trying to do as well as he or she can in a very ugly world but usually failing. It is a very black, closed world, with no way out, no real possibility of resistance. This is clearly dystopia, just as the excitement of cyberspace is his little pseudo-utopia. This is – paradoxically, if you will – too direct a reflection of what is happening today. I think a deeper view would say, "Yes, it is a very difficult situation but there are some alternative possibilities." Maybe difficult, maybe very small possibilities, but not only personal love is left – which is fine but not quite enough. So I think Gibson is a bit defeatist, he accepts the status quo a bit too readily. His work does not accept the status quo values, Gibson hates those values; but he accepts it as unchangeable. That I call defeatism, because everything changes. The British Empire looked eternal, it doesn't exist any longer – which is the theme of people like Ballard or Aldiss: everything is running down, time is running down. Thus the US empire is also not eternal; the Russian empire is just about to run down by now. Therefore I think Gibson is too defeatist, but still he is interesting – at least he writes about real problems. So I don't fully agree with your skepticism about cyberpunk. Now if this were in the 1960s, I would say cyberpunk is a little marginal movement. If we were in the Mississippi valley, a relatively small patch of green is not too important. But if we are in the Gobi desert, then cyberpunk is rather important (*laughs*).

Y: Yes, I understand what you mean, though I have a somewhat different opinion about cyberpunk.

S: Well, we can discuss it again at another opportunity. However, I must confess to you that after about 1980 I have not been reading SF systematically. I am working on other things, on theatre and so on, and furthermore I just cannot read most of what is published as SF today. I'm not reading SF journals anymore, I only read some books. Before 1980 I tried to read everything …

Y: Everything!

S: Well, a representative selection of everything, say 30 percent quantitatively maybe. But then I stopped. It just does not seem worth my time and energy.

Y: I'd like to ask you a second question. You are also famous as a theatre critic, as well as an SF critic. What I want to know is again where your

interests in theatre and drama basically came from, and are there some relations or similarities between drama and SF?

S: There are some formal similarities between drama theatre and SF, I think, insofar as every performance is a little space-time world, just like a planet in SF. So it is very easy, I think, for somebody interested in drama to be interested in SF, if that person has nothing against this specific post-industrial vocabulary and so on. Now most theatre critics are nostalgic and conservative. They want Kabuki, Noh or Bunraku, and they don't want Satoh Makoto or Betsuyaku Minoru, or whatever.

Y: But you are interested in both of them, classics and modern plays, aren't you?

S: Yes, I am attempting to combine a great attention to tradition – a deep interest in medieval plays, in Bunraku, in Shakespeare, in Zeami Motokiyo and Chikamatsu Monzaemon, and so on – with an interest in modern drama. And my main writing about drama has been, as you may have heard, a book called *To Brecht and Beyond*. In it my main focus was on Bertolt Brecht, the modern German playwright: not only do I feel ideologically very close to him, but also I think that, regardless of my feelings, he is the best dramatist of this century, the Shakespeare of the twentieth century, so to speak. Unfortunately this our century did not give him so much scope and peace as Elizabethan England gave to Shakespeare, and he died too young, he didn't finish his work in the sense that Shakespeare finished his work.

Y: Would you tell me what do you intend by the title *To Brecht and Beyond*?

S: Up to Brecht and going beyond him. "To Brecht" means that I begin with the eighteenth-nineteenth century, bourgeois drama, Ibsen, so on, and "Beyond" is Beckett and Happenings. And in the middle is Brecht …

I was a theater critic, in Yugoslavia, for many years, first in the student newspaper, then in dailies, weeklies, and so on. I went to many festivals around Europe, I saw the Stratford and Royal Shakespeare UK theaters, the Berliner Ensemble, Piccolo Teatro in Milano, the great French season of Vilar, Planchon – the 1950s and 1960s, the great golden age of drama and theater in Europe, the post-war explosion of drama. And as of the mid-1960s I was in North America, so I saw both repertory theaters and

the New York situation: Happenings, Broadway, Off-Broadway, Off-off, and so on. But when I started teaching at university, I gradually ceased to be a theater critic, because a theater critic must have a lot of time, he must write the next day immediately, and I started writing on theater and drama history and theory. I did my dissertation on the European nineteenth–twentieth century, fin-de-siécle.

Y: Was that your doctoral dissertation?

S: Yes, my Ph.D. was on European drama between 1880 and 1920 roughly. In a way, as I mentioned, drama is similar to SF formally or syntactically – it has little closed chronotopes as we would say today, in Bakhtin's terms, little Einsteinian space-times. But drama and SF are also in a way sociologically close, because theatre, of course, cannot exist without an interested audience. Poetry can be written by a poet alone starving in a garret, no audience at all, maybe after 15 years somebody begins reading it: this is very frequent in poetry. In theatre that is impossible, theatre without an audience is nonsense. And SF also has its audience, which is the fans. So sociologically the situation is very similar. It is, of course, very different as to type of audience. The theatre audience is usually upper-class, the SF audience is a kind of middle-class, not working-class …

Y: How about students? Many SF fans are students, aren't they?

S: Yes, and students are somewhat outside the class system anyway. Students are, as anthropologists say, liminal, marginal. The young technocratic intelligentsia, that is the main audience of SF. Theatre audience is not always upper-class – for Happenings it was mainly a bohemian intelligentsia, Beckett's is a stoic intelligentsia, so to speak, Brecht tried to get to the working-class – but usually theatre audience is upper middle-class and lower upper-class, because upper upper-class does nothing except work, it doesn't go to the theatre – their wives maybe, the women of the stock market leaders go to the theatre (*laughs*).

Y: Anyway both theatre and SF must have audiences, that's what you say.

S: Of course it is different in every country, every epoch, and so on – but there are also some similarities, which is that these audiences seem to be sociologically self-contained units. Brecht was writing for the left-wing

movement in Germany before and after Hitler. Beckett was writing for Parisian Left-Bank intelligentsia, this seems very clear. Now a novel is supposed to be written for everybody. A poem is also supposed to be written for everybody, at least for all poetry lovers. But although I'm sure dramatists would love to have everybody go to theatre and SF writers would love to have everybody read them – in fact, SF and theatre have a target audience. This audience is intuitively clear to the writers, not because they have read sociological articles, but because if you are a good theatre writer you know who you are writing for, you know what they will digest and what they will not digest. You don't write about sex in the nineteenth-century theatre, not because of censorship but because your audience will not take it: even Ibsen cannot write about sex. Even Brecht has problems writing about sex. In 1970, no problem, the audience has changed. So I think that both SF and theatre are more sensitive to social changes than normal literature and culture, because they have precise audiences.

Y: Well, my opinion about SF and its readers is a bit different from yours, though I know almost nothing about theatre audience. Basically I see SF as almost the same as any other literature insofar as imagination is concerned. Perhaps it is more advanced and sensitive to the present day than anything else in literature, while the level of its readers is rather low. I think the peculiarity of SF readers is a superficial thing and not essential to SF as a literature. But I understand what you mean.

S: OK. And therefore theatre and SF are very interesting to me. If you believe that culture has something to do with everyday life and it's not simply playing bridge or mah-jong, it's not simply an empty game, it is semantically full – if you want to speak theoretically, it has a reference – then these are very interesting genres. They have a reference, not necessarily to society as a whole, but they represent the opinions about society of those social groups. I don't mean by society everyday politics but society as human relations – should we have a love suicide or should we not have a love suicide, never mind who is the emperor or shogun, who cares about that (anyway it's forbidden). That is the problem in Chikamatsu, let's say, should they have a love suicide, yes or no, not direct politics but the social situation: how do we live, how can we live. So this is clear both in theatre and in SF.

In the last five years or so, I have been thinking that I am old enough to start thinking of a theory of theater. I don't believe in a non-historical

theory. Theory comes from history and goes back to history. Of course it has a formal independence, but first you must understand history. And I have been working at history for twenty-five years or more, history of drama theater of the eighteenth–nineteenth century, twentieth century, Shakespeare, and so on, maybe now I understand enough to begin writing theory of theater. Thus, I sat down and read all the handbooks of theater which exist in English, introductions to theater and drama for students, forty-plus titles, and I saw a very funny thing: that 90 percent of them have no theory at all. They just said things such as that theater is a building, you come and see plays, drama is something divided into three acts which has characters speaking on stage (*laughs*), totally empiricistic, no theory at all. This is the Anglo-American tradition. My tradition is Continental, I come from Hegel, Marx, Bloch, and so on. OK, I studied also in England and the USA, so I like the empirical tradition. I think you should have a cybernetic feedback between the empirical tradition and the theoretical tradition. Because theory sometimes gets too abstract, a horrible example is say Heidegger, and empiricism is like a horse with blinkers for eyes: a horse with blinkers cannot look left or right, that is the empirical tradition. You see very well what is in front of your nose, but what is here and there on the sides and all around you don't see. So if one can have a feedback, that's much better. Now 10 percent of the books I read have some theory, but it is strictly a theory drawn from – and therefore only applicable to – the European theater tradition, including North America, which is a cultural satellite of Europe. There are two independent things the Americans invented in theater, one is the musical and the second is the Happening. Everything else is a copy of Europe.

Y: You are a European, of course (*laughs*).

S: Right – but not anti-American. Anyway, there is today no theory of theatre which can explain Shakespeare, Ibsen, and the Noh play. It doesn't exist in English, or in French, or in Russian, or in German – in any European language. So I decided I must study some Asian theatre. I thought maybe Indian, maybe Chinese, but I finally decided for the Japanese. This is very presumptuous, because my knowledge of Japanese is practically zero, obviously I don't properly understand Noh, Kyogen, Kabuki or Bunraku. But I have been studying Japanese culture, and

perhaps I can understand the stage, space, visual conventions, acting, if I study very hard, and if I am helped by some colleagues in Japan and so on. I can never really understand Japanese theatre, it's too late in my life, but enough from Japanese theatre, little information bytes, to prevent my saying about a theory, "this is a theory of theatre," when in fact it is only a theory of European theatre. In other words, what I'd like to do is, first of all, to do something about Japan that I can understand, and you know I told you I was writing an essay on a parallel between Peter Weiss and Satoh Makoto, between *Marat/Sade* and *Tsubasa o moyasu tenshi-tachi no butô (Dance of the Angels Who Burn Their Own Wings)*. This is very interesting because the *Tsubasa* performance in 1970–71 by KuroTento (The Black Tent) was, I think, a kind of culmination of the students' and youth protest movement, a very interesting formulation of its experiences. Then maybe, with the help of understanding these little bytes of Japanese theatre, I can try to write about some aspects of a theatre theory that would be really a theory of theatre, not a theory of European theatre.

Y: Well, I understand your intention to write such a new theatre theory, and the meaning of a parallel between Weiss and Kuro Tento performance for that. It is clear that such a comparison could be useful and meaningful for a sense of modern, youth culture. But how about Japanese classical theatre? Of course you like them very much, don't you?

S: Insofar as I understand them, yes – and I'm quite enthralled by Noh.

Y: But they are extremely different from European theatres, especially Noh. Even for us Japanese, except for professionals, they are sometimes difficult simply to understand, as well as to understand what meaning they have today. What in, or which part of, Japanese classical theatre attracts you?

S: It attracts me precisely because it is different from European theatres. For, if my theory will have a certain coverage span – here is European theatre, and here is Japanese classical theatre, if I can make a theory which is helpful in understanding both of them, then I have some confidence that it can also explain all in between them, in the middle, because they are so extremely different. For example, in many Waki Noh (the God Noh), there is no conflict. Now the definition of dramatic theatre in Europe is that it is conflict, Macbeth against Macduff, Othello

against Iago, it is always conflict. Even in Brecht, there are deep conflicts, though always in view – or from the point of view – of a final revelation. But there is no conflict in Waki Noh, only revelation. The first act is a spoken introduction to a legend, at second act the god comes out and dances the legend – there is no conflict at all. Therefore, immediately, a theory of theatre which is based on conflict is not a good theory of theatre. But all the theories we have so far begin with that. So either we have to say, Noh is not dramatic theatre – it's something else, ritual or so on – which I think is not a good strategy, or we have to say the theories we have so far are only valid for European theatre. They are not really, anthropologically speaking, theory of theatre as a potentiality of Homo sapiens. They are, at best, theory of European-culture theatre. Well, that is quite interesting. And if it is true, that is quite revolutionary, a big theoretical revolution. I don't know whether it is true or not. I have to study much more to know it. But this is a quite interesting study, worth doing seriously, if I shall have time and energy enough.

Y: I think it's very interesting too. But is there no one who has ever presented such a theory? There are a lot of people studying Japanese theatre.

S: Well, you see, I'm not a Japanologist or Nipponologist. On the one hand this is a big problem because I have difficulties with language, and I feel very ashamed when I come to Japan. On the other hand there are some advantages, because almost all people who study Japanese theatre are professional Japanologists. And they write only about Japan, they don't do comparisons with Europe-America. I teach comparative literature, so I operate on a higher level of abstraction. It is not better, it is not worse, it is simply different. But people who study Japan usually don't study Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Brecht. Now I know very little about Japan, but I do know Shakespeare and Ibsen and Brecht. So if I can learn enough about Japan, maybe I can put them together. Of course I wouldn't pretend to say everything, I would just like to say one or two things and then leave it to the next generation, my doctoral students and so on.

Let me also say that I think the Japanese tradition is so extremely interesting because it is totally different from the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Judeo-Christian tradition is monotheistic, you have God, you

have the Devil, then conflict. Now if you have 10,000 kamis, you have a kami, I have a kami, and the table (or carpentry) has a kami, then we get much more complicated conflicts, if any. And what is interesting is, I think, that modern theater in Europe, people like Brecht or Weiss, have moved away from this Shakespeare-to-Ibsen monotheistic formula. Modern drama is a kind of polytheistic or animistic atheism, I think, if you want to speak in a religious vocabulary (perhaps somewhat outdated).

This is, by the way, the same in SF, I think. The old SF, Asimov or Heinlein, is God against the Devil, the good Americans against the bad monsters from outer space. Well, after the 1960s this becomes different. In Dick, the Americans become bad instead of good, in his *The Man in the High Castle the Americans* are bad and Mr. Tagomi is good, for example. It is becoming much more interesting.

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SF and History, Cyberpunk, Russia … (Interview with Horst Pukallus) (1989)

PUKALLUS: Dr. Suvin, you are a professor of literature, a scholar of repute, and you were co-editor of *Science-Fiction Studies* for eight years, which some people would think of as a contradiction. What explanation is there for your special weakness for SF?

SUVIN: First of all, philosophically speaking, I am a materialist, and a materialist has to start from the material. I also did six years of science and have a degree in chemical engineering. What would that chemist be who said "I don't want to deal with this compound because it smells bad" (which is not to admit that SF must smell bad)? How come there are so many literary scholars who say, "I don't want to deal with what people really read?" SF, thrillers, and love romances are what people really read – as different from what critics have said was good 100 years ago. I'm not

trying to turn such traditional judgments simply upside down and say that we should read only SF and forget Shakespeare. There is a division of labour in scholarship by now; I regret that and have during my whole career refused to be fully imprisoned in it, so I've written about Shakespeare, Brecht or Peter Weiss as well as about Happenings. Nonetheless, if we are in the sorrowful situation of a society split into upper and lower social classes and therefore cultural markets, let's at least investigate everything that exists – upper, lower, middle or mixed. Furthermore, what is now considered high was not always such: in his time, Shakespeare appealed, in great part, to social groups analogous to those that SF appeals to in our time – the Elizabethans called them the groundlings, the popular masses. So all that I'm saying is: we live in this system of elite versus mass literature, which I don't like too much, I think the whole system is unhealthy. It's just as unhealthy to focus only on the elite literature as it is to focus only on *Perry Rhodan* and never to read anything else. I don't understand why all professionals would want to talk only about "high literature" and why half or at least a fifth of them would not talk about the reading stuff of the generality of readers. I think SF, thrillers, nurse romances, etc., are very important; maybe they are bad: but then we must analyze how and why they are bad. I have read a lot of SF books, as well as an awful lot of psychological or "high" fiction, and I don't think SF books are statistically worse than anything else. Maybe 95% of SF is rather bad, but that is not worse than anything else: 95% of published poetry is rather mediocre, and yet nobody refuses to analyse poetry.

Second, the basic events in my life were World War II and the simultaneous Yugoslav Revolution. They were formative events, when I was very young, from age 11 on. They had consequences for my thinking: it became very easy to think of alternative time-streams, of alternative histories, because we all lived them. When I was a little boy, there was still monarchist Yugoslavia; then we had the Fascist occupation, we had the partisans, the revolution, post-war Titoism. These all were alternative time-streams. It was very clear what would happen if Hitler won the war: one didn't need to read Philip K. Dick to know it. A small Nazi bomb hit 50 meters from me in 1943 or 1944: in a very slightly alternative world, I'd have died then, in my teens – and I've always felt, on the one hand, that every extra day was

pure gravy, and on the other that I have certain responsibilities to speak for those who did not survive. When Tito broke with Stalin, the alternatives were also very clear. I was on the KGB blacklist, I learned a bit later: in the somewhat more strongly alternative world where Stalin invaded Yugoslavia after 1948, there was a high chance I'd have ended up on the gallows before I'd gotten out of my teens. So you had your nose rubbed into alternative histories, into "possible worlds." I found out that this concept in philosophy goes back to Leibniz, but I saw it first in practice, and then in print where Leibniz also finally found it: in utopian works, fantastic voyages, etc.

So I got very interested in such books. After the War (for my generation, those born in the 1930s, there is only one War), I read Verne, Wells, and Thomas More, and then I went on to SF. I think my first article about SF – published in Yugoslavia in 1958 – was a kind of survey of the genre, which led to a book in the 1960s. This possibility of catching a great number of wavelengths much appealed to me, and that was the result of the historical epoch I lived through. Then at some point I started to translate. As well as some short stories, I translated Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids* and Blish's *The Seedling Stars*, for example, into the Serbo-Croatian language. I started working in the field as a hobby; my professional specialty is modern drama. The book I published in Yugoslavia in 1965 was a historical introduction, a general view of the genre, commencing with Lucian of Samosata and leading to modern SF, to Heinlein, Gérard Klein, and the Strugatsky Brothers. I also wrote entries on SF and a number of SF writers (Asimov, Heinlein, etc.; I still have a gracious letter of thanks from Ray Bradbury) for a Yugoslav encyclopedia. And then, when I came to teach in the US – having been by some basically political (nationalist) maneuvers deprived of the possibility of university teaching in my own country – it was 1967, a time of student revolt. The students wanted a great number of things, from power in the university to SF courses. The power in the university they didn't get (I remember a breakfast discussion with Marcuse where I vainly tried to understand how society would radically change even if they did get it), but the SF courses they did get. Suddenly I was very marketable. I was hired to teach drama and SF at the McGill University in 1968.

Student interest collapsed around 1973/1974. It collapsed, in my opinion, together with first-rate SF; the last significant book of that last

major SF wave, the crest where the wave collapses, was Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*. There followed a long trough of general disinterest during which I have not been teaching SF regularly. But interest (not just mine) seems to be increasing again now; I did a new course on SF last year [1988–89]. However, I can earn my livelihood very well without SF, so that I can speak objectively. And part of my interest in SF led me to theoretical approaches. For to my mind there is no such thing as a naked eye, there's always a brain behind the eye; even behind the photographic lens there is the eye and brain of the photographer. In consequence, whenever you talk about SF, you are speaking theoretically. However, if you aren't conscious that you have a theory, you can't control it, you can't criticize yourself, you don't have even the possibility of feedback for self-examination. Therefore, it's better to have an explicit than an implicit theory: your chances of being halfway intelligent are better. But of course 90 percent of all criticism of SF is not much good either.

P: I would like to talk a little about cyberpunk. Cyberpunk is celebrated as the hard SF of today, as the integration of high-tech and sub-culture, and SF authors claim – not for the first time – that they are taking over the role of mainstream literature. But I would think it has some significance when Garcìa Marquez gets the Nobel Prize and Bruce Sterling does not. What can you say about literary qualities of cyberpunk?

S: I have some doubts that the label of cyberpunk is more than an invention to help sell texts. I really don't know what is the common denominator among Greg Bear, Lucius Shepard, Norman Spinrad, William Gibson, and Bruce Sterling. Norman Spinrad has always been one of the most talented SF people around, and he just may have written the best cyberpunk novel, *Little Heroes* – outside cyberpunk but rejuvenated by it, so to speak. I think Shepard is a critical writer (that's a positive judgment in my mouth), but I'm not sure how he fits into cyberpunk. I think Gibson is a very good writer, though unfortunately his writing seems to be declining; I'm very disappointed at the rehash in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. *Neuromancer* was, I think, a splendid book; half of the stories in the collection *Burning Chrome* were splendid; *Count Zero* is halfway okay, but there Gibson already begins going downhill. Perhaps there is a poetically just, though very high, price to be paid for writing Hollywood

scenarios (maybe in proportion to the price received for those scenarios?) … I have just read Bruce Sterling's latest book, *Islands in the Net*, to my mind his best book though I have some reservations about it; the rest I found rather bad by Gibson's standards, including *Schismatrix* as well as the rather muddled *Involution Ocean*. That's a pity, because Sterling is an intelligent and articulate person with a wealth of ideas shooting off at undisciplined tangents (I analyze Gibson and Sterling at length in an essay in *Foundation* no. 46). So I would be very dubious about calling cyberpunk a real movement or school; it's more a group of friends praising each other. The best people – Gibson, for instance – do have something new to say; and it's the first new thing that's interested me (except for some women writing SF) since *The Dispossessed*.

I confess that I just can't read most of what has been published in the last fifteen years. I pick it up and try, from time to time, but mostly I can't; so I have favorite authors by now of whom I read every book, say C.J. Cherryh, but I cannot follow the whole genre any longer (when I realized that, I resigned from editorship of *SFS*). This may partly be a judgment on an aging critic: but I have a great deal of curiosity left in me still, and I think it's mainly a judgment on the genre. What's been happening in SF is a terrible contamination with Fantasy. If you like Fantasy, it's okay – I myself like some of it, from Kafka and Calvino to Tanith Lee or some Japanese. But I don't think Fantasy is at all the same as SF; and having it half this, half that – what Blish once called Science Fantasy – is really horrible. Fantasy should not be published in the same way as and as if it were SF.

The SF-Fantasy opposition isn't at all the same as the one between hard SF vs. soft SF. What I think is interesting in cyberpunk is exactly the breakdown of the distinction between hard and soft SF – that your brain becomes the software of the new hardware, if you wish to speak this scientific language (which, I think, is not too important). If you wish to speak about it on a deeper level, important for writers and critics, I do think that Gibson's books, and perhaps a few by other 1980s authors too, have renewed the language of SF: they have integrated the computer-hacker lingo into it. The claims of and for that social group may be vastly overblown: I don't think their way of life is representative of the whole world today; it's not even representative of the whole young generation of Western Europe

or the US. These semi-yuppies are in fact economically the upper class of the largely unemployed youth of today. But it is representative of a very important little group: the media people, electronic mixers, computer freaks – the social bearers of this cyberpunk structure of feeling. There is something new here: there is a basically new technology and a new social position of the group that has access to this technology, and that I find interesting. For example, Gibson's extrapolated future – supposedly extrapolated, because I don't believe SF is extrapolation, though it is, of course, very important that it simulates extrapolation – is a Japanese, not a North American future. This is important not because of the nation, but because Japanese capitalism is a corporative capitalism – a kind of neo-feudal capitalism, if you wish – different from the US variety. Therefore Gibson's is a hypothesis about the future of capitalism: that it's going to become more and more Japanese or corporativistic and undemocratic. I hope Gibson and Sterling are wrong, but I rationally believe they are most probably right. At any rate, the fact that they focus on this variant means something; it means they have realized they are living in the 1980s.

P: I've read cyberpunk books and I think they are well-written adventure stories – but not more. I was disappointed by their characterisation, in part by their style too, but mainly by their curious notion that the world has become too difficult to understand, so that the only principle to follow is everyone for himself (or herself). Why can't people who think of themselves as top writers see any possibility of explaining the multiplicity of thinking, of life-styles, of processes around the world?

S: I believe that any piece of writing is determined by its implied reader – modern literary theory maintains there is an ideal reader inscribed between the lines, an ideal addressee – and it's not difficult to find the ideal reader of cyberpunk: computer hackers, media mixers, technicians of TV and radio stations, mobile young professionals, free-lancers, jet-setters who don't care whether they work in Tokyo, London, Düsseldorf or Los Angeles – they just want to have their machines, they want to be part of a global network. The ideal cyberpunk reader should be someone like Bob Geldof, a kind of global media expert. Their position is very strange. They despise the bureaucracy, they don't want to be mass people or peons

(proletarians: that's a recurring nightmare in Gibson), they want fun, they want sex, they want to travel around the world. And yet they live off the despised bureaucracy. They live because of multinational capitalist prosperity. They are against it, but they are inside the system; and the system doesn't allow you to see its workings (at best you can mumble something about mysterious AIs or – gods help us – voodoo deities). In a way I think of cyberpunk as the beginning of post-modernism in SF. I don't like Post-Modernism; but it can't be denied that the previous era – the Leninist era, or Picasso era, or Brecht era, or whatever you want to call it, one in which the best people were propagating the marriage between the political and the esthetic avant-garde – has collapsed. It collapsed partially several times, in the 30s and the late 40s and 50s; but it has collapsed finally today, I think: there are no global alternative theories anymore. So cyberpunk is a pretty direct reflection of the social position, not of our whole society, but of a particular group which is very interesting and important, but which also has its strong limitations: it's certainly not the point of view of the whole world.

P: Is it not the task of a writer to speak for the people who have no voice and to explain the things these people have no means to understand on their own?

S: Indeed, I think, all the great writers – Shakespeare, Balzac, Tolstoy, even Joyce, I would say – have always spoken for large social groups. But those groups are not necessarily the plebeian groups. Workers and farmers are usually not represented in "high literature." SF as a whole, in my opinion, has always been written for the young of the "middle" classes. All the statistics we have, which are very few, say that the main age for reading SF is 13–25. So it's a kind of medium for a specific social group of its own which has not quite differentiated into upper class and lower class (a present-day student is neither/nor). The greatest writer of SF up to the present probably is still H.G. Wells (we could debate this, but from the standpoint of international recognition it's certainly Wells); and about him there is a great amount of evidence by now – biographies, documentations, critical literature – elucidating which social groups he was writing about. And he gave his voice not to the workers (the workers were the Morlocks) and not to the upper class (they were the Eloi), but to

the observer in between, the Time Traveller. It's very difficult for an SF writer, I think, to write about the people, if you mean by that the great majority of the working classes – I don't mean industrial workers, but those whom the Japanese capitalists so nicely call "the salarymen" (and women). The working classes have never been represented in SF in my opinion, and I'm not sure they could be. I think SF is a literature of the in-between classes. Which are very important, because who these classes go with determines who wins: if they go with the upper class, the upper class wins, if they go with the workers, then the workers win.

However, it's extremely difficult to answer your question. We would have to analyze who Dick lends his voice to, who Le Guin gives her voice to (they're the most important SF writers in the US of the 1960s). Who do the Strugatsky Brothers give voice to? Clearly the Russian intelligentsia, not the workers and peasants. That's okay; I have nothing against it. One shouldn't expect too much. Your question is a populist question. I would dearly like to answer, "Yes, wonderful." (By the way, as a populist, you shouldn't use this quintessentially elitist, politicized, and conservative Nobel Prize – which was given to a Kissinger, for heaven's sake! – as an argument for quality of writing.) But to do so, first of all you have to have writers who understand the experiences of the workers and peasants, and secondly a reading public for whom you can write – at least some nuclei such as existed in the Weimar Republic, when the workers went to their singing clubs, their associations and trade unions, and there was even some theater for workers. At that point you can have a Brecht. You can't have a Brecht today: the workers are looking at television. If we are really materialists, we have to believe that the material circumstances give you certain possibilities and enforce certain limitations; so it's no good to tell the writer, "Why don't you write for the people?" Which people? The people who are looking at television? But one can write intelligently for a critical intelligentsia or middle class, maybe; and that's the best we can expect realistically. That's the way I read the ideological situation today.

P: My concept of a writer is that of a person who takes a lifetime to unfold what s/he believes s/he has to say and to improve her or his ways of saying it. I've the impression that the so-called cyberpunk movement is just a bunch of talented writers who are too unsure of themselves, too

impatient to think of a message, to allow themselves time to develop their own style and literary uniqueness. Or would you regard this as much too hard a position?

S: Let's talk about Gibson. The trajectory of Gibson seems to me very interesting. He's not exactly a Vietnam War deserter; but he came to Canada at the same time as they did (albeit at a very young age), and it's very interesting and important that he lived first in Toronto and then in Vancouver. He was getting out of the US; and the experiences in/behind *Neuromancer* are the experiences of looking at the US from the outside, to some extent, in an alienated "Nipponic" way. Now he's in Hollywood, writing scenarios for sequels to *Alien*. For that there is a price to pay, as I said earlier (Heinlein's TANSTAAFL, "There Ain't No Such Thing as a Free Lunch"). He's famous, well-paid; but his novels get worse and worse: he's started writing about voodoo as an explanation of the world situation …

Yet let me speak in defense of cyberpunk. What you are asking its practitioners to do is to be better than history, to transcend history. In other words, to be heroes. Very few people are heroes. Joyce was a hero: he went into exile and wrote his thing, never mind what happened. That's a stance very few people can maintain, and it's unfair to ask them. It's unfair to ask somebody to be a Proust, a Joyce, or a Brecht. Market circulation is getting faster and faster today: fashions change more and more quickly. What you say is quite correct: these authors are impatient; they don't leave themselves time. But that's because they are exactly suited to the times. I don't mean that they sit down and say: what is it the market wants from us? Many do, but I think the best do not. I think they catch – very indirectly – the spirit of the age. They are aware of the pace of events; they know the world whirls around ever more rapidly, so to speak. As Balzac said, writers are only secretaries of the society: whatever society dictates to me, I write down. One out of a thousand can be a hero and say, "I only listen to the Muse." Balzac killed himself by writing so much; but most of us want rather to live, and have to live from something. Though I think you have a good point, I would defend the cyberpunk authors at least to this extent: I think we

get the SF we deserve. (No, on second thought, I think that's not quite true: most SF is worse than we deserve.)

P: Gibson spoke of cyberpunk being in the tradition of William Burroughs. I know the works of Burroughs well and find this hard to believe. Burroughs is at least a kind of rebel; he calls for a breakthrough into reality – to see its true face and to understand it – while cyberpunk seems to me a form of capitulation and a flight into a new, electronic type of inner space. Do you see any connection between Burroughs and cyberpunk?

S: If you analyse the plot in the major works of Gibson, it is what I call in my *Foundation* essay "Romeo and Juliet in Chiba City." There is a love story between two little people, not between the owners, the big people: the big people are horrible; those up there in orbit are monsters, freaks. These little people, the computer cowboy and the street samurai, try but can't maintain a love affair, just as Romeo and Juliet's love affair was squelched. The stars are against them again, in this case not the Elizabethan astrologers' stars but the little *shuriken* stars of that sleazy corporate world. So I think there is a real rebellion in the best of Gibson; there is sympathy for the little people; there is a very clear, cynical view of the power struggles. In that sense, I think, the cyberpunk writers have half a dozen forefathers: one is Bester, another is Pynchon, maybe; and certainly Burroughs, too. So they are at the interface of SF and what is called mainstream literature, although of course inside SF. And Burroughs was the one who showed us that the hallucinatory operators are real; in other words, a world where drugs are normal, where killing is an everyday occurrence – the world of high capitalism – is real. Let's say the best of cyberpunk can be read as a kind of Rousseauist rebellion (even if with many impurities). I would defend, for example, *Neuromancer* very strongly. I think it is certainly politically much better informed than the *New York Times* or 99% of the North American population. Of course Gibson is exceptional. Even in Shepard's interesting book *Life during Wartime* a global war is going on for years and years because two Panamanian families somewhere behind the scenes are fighting each other! That's politically illiterate.

Sterling's novel *Islands in the Net* is not bad, but it's politically illiterate, too. I'm sorry, but that's the way people get educated today.

P: Let's switch to the other side of the world, to the USSR. Do you think the *perestroika* policy has consequences for Soviet SF?

S: I think it's too early to tell. To judge from what I know today, June 1989, I don't really think it's had greatly visible consequences yet in the published SF. In a sense this is paradoxical: there are two complementary and opposed reasons for this. First, Stalinism (Zhdanovism, Brezhnevism, what they so nicely call over there "stagnation") has still a stranglehold on SF publishing. Second, what used to be visible only in SF is now visible in the Soviet Parliament and in the *Pravda*. What used to be visible in the works of the Strugatsky Brothers could then only be published in their Aesopic, coded language. I think that in the long run, that is if *perestroika* goes on, publishing will get unshackled. But then this second aspect will be the deeper one, and a good thing for Soviet SF: it will become a normal genre, no longer responsible for the fate of the Russian intelligentsia (which is a very heavy load for a literary genre). That has traditionally been the role of the Russian literature. Under Czarism you had the government and you had Tolstoy, and Tolstoy really was the voice of the people, the voice of the peasants. I expect there will be fewer problems with censorship. SF, including that of the Strugatsky Brothers, had terrible problems with censorship in the USSR. We must assume that many of the best things not only didn't get published, but never got written, because the writers knew they would have such problems. This, I think, is now becoming a thing of the past.

But it depends. The most important SF publishing house is not so much in the government's hands as in nationalist or right-wing hands, and SF is really more of the Sakharov or Medvedev line of thinking, what is in our newspapers called "liberal" (which is, I think, a stupid adjective in this context). So SF authors may get to have that type of problem now – that they are "not sufficiently Russian," not sufficiently nationalist – instead of problems with censorship; but probably it will be a smaller problem. My main feeling about Russian SF since the fall of Khrushchev (or, say, since 1968) was that it was forced into a very

unfortunate symbiosis – quite parallel with the symbiosis between SF and Fantasy in the US, except that in the Russian tradition it's not with horror and other Fantasy but with the folktale. You can see this already in the Strugatskys' *Monday Begins on Saturday*; and other authors, among them the best ones, have been forced into this symbiosis. Not "forced" in the sense that the police told them, "You must write fairy tales"; rather, that symbiosis was one way to write something which had an esthetic form. And the national tradition is very strong in Russia: people were still telling folktales in the villages one or two generations ago. I personally feel that this influence has some strengths, especially when used ironically, as the Strugatskys used it. But it's also very dangerous because the fairy tale is an older genre, and if you want to write fairy tales you're not going to write SF. So this main trend in good Soviet SF since 1968 is not one that I like: I think that it renders SF harmless. By good SF, I mean Bilenkin, Gor, Varshavsky, the Strugatskys, Shefner, Larionova, Bulychov, and others. The trend was to keep it what I would call non-cognitive. I should also add that there has been a lot of awfully bad SF published in the USSR for ideological reasons, because a committee liked its hacks. I think that can stop now. I don't know, but I hope so. They will then have to contend with a lot of bad market SF: the market will find its hacks too, no doubt (often the same who wrote for the committees, that breed is durable).

P: Vladimir Gakov talks about a new generation of Russian SF writers – Yevgeny Lubin, Vitali Babenko, Leonid Passanenko, for instance – and says their target is a conformist and consumer mentality. Is this a promising new tendency?

S: Well, maybe, but that's nothing new. This has been the language of the Russian critics of the Strugatskys in the '60s. For example, *Tale of the Troika* was interpreted as critical of a combination of bureaucratic and consumer mentality. But to criticise consumerism is a very ambiguous thing. What does it mean, as a slogan? Back to hunger? Which kind of consumption, which type of consumer? This has to be made much more precise for me before I start saluting it as a big and interesting new development. On the other hand I think Gakov is correct: there are a lot of new names. These authors may get better possibilities to

publish, and I think they will be liberated from a double pressure: the pressure of censorship and the pressure of being in one of the very few places where you could have alternatives to the official, government line voiced publicly. For a short time Soviet SF will become, perhaps, not so popular – and not so controversial, maybe – because it no longer has only the choice between being ideological and political opposition or being trash. Finally, since the Russians are a highly talented people, to my mind Russian SF – which should not be called Soviet any longer then – could become qualitatively equal to any other SF in the world, including British and US.

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SF – Literature, Movies, Theater, and Polytheism: Interview with Liao Chao-yang (1994)

LIAO: For many people here in Taiwan, SF is a quintessentially American genre. This may have a lot to do with the dominant presence of Hollywood, but isn't it also true that, following your thesis of the novum as rooted in and delimited by the material conditions of the present, we have to say that for cultures without a strong background in cutting-edge technology (as here), it is simply impossible to develop a strong SF tradition? I understand that you are originally from former Yugoslavia, and that your interests cover wide geographic areas, including Japan as well as Eastern Europe. From a cross-cultural perspective, what can you tell us about the relevance of SF to third-world cultures?

SUVIN: No, SF is not essentially an American genre (by "American" I guess you mean "US"). It is no doubt existentially such, since it has been commercially kidnapped and then dumped on the rest of the world as of ca. 1945 by the USA, which has of course produced many splendid writers and beautiful texts (I hope you saw my appreciations of a few of them). But even if you want to exclude Plato, Lucian of Samosata, all

the Extraordinary Voyages down to Swift's Laputa, More's Utopia, and Morris's Nowhere, as most US critics do, there's no serious dispute about it beginning with Mary Shelley (and I'd emphatically add Percy Shelley; see his *Prometheus Unbound*), Jules Verne, the Future War genre burgeoning in England, France and the whole Europe, 1870–1914, and the Alternative Histories (I found about 400 such titles in my book *Victorian Science Fiction in the UK., 1848–1901*); this reached a first culmination in H.G. Wells who subsumes all prior impulses and retransmits them, metamorphosised in his own way, to future writers. And up to 1940 the "high literature" European tradition of philosophico-political or if you wish anthropological investigation of an Olaf Stapledon or Aldous Huxley in the UK, a Rosny in France, a Karel Čapek, and many other European writers, was at least equal to the US tradition going from, say, Poe through Bellamy to Jack London.

What happened in the USA ca. 1910–40 is complex and very little investigated, but it was a huge quantitative extension into both pulp magazines and cheap books coupled with a huge cooptation of the critical impulse under "mass entertainment," with adventures within an unquestioned framework that in the best cases – as seen, say, later in Heinlein and Asimov – Wells once described as "capitalism in a state of hugely inflamed distension" (or some such words). You could, of course, celebrate it as the "manifest destiny" of intergalactic empires and/or supermen, or you could nostalgically look back at the good old times before the distension (Ray Bradbury and Clifford Simak). Some indications exist about the (literal plus metaphorical) dumping of hundreds of such books and magazines in England and France, which more or less throttled the native traditions. Russia between, say, 1929 and 1989 reacted with censorship – not very effective after the rise of radio and then TV – and produced an independent, critical reworking of Wells. So, creatively, SF is a European invention transplanted into the USA. It became creatively theirs, no doubt, with accents at least equivalent to and quantitatively much more diverse than the Europeans, with the great "New Wave" of ca. 1961–73. But you could still argue (I would) that names like Lem, Calvino, and several Britons are at least on the par with the best US writers.

I think Hollywood is here secondary. Film was of course always much more strictly censored (from within and without the industry) than books, which were censored only from within, for example, by the notorious "gatekeeping" editors of SF such as Campbell. Ninety-nine percent of Hollywood's so-called SF production, on the model of Green Slime from Outer Space, is abominably clumsy and usually horror fantasy, not SF.

Is SF wedded to technology? The question seems oversimplified. SF is wedded, I think, to the "it ain't necessarily so" spirit immensely furthered by the radical skepticism of modern science in its heroic phase, before it got co-opted and tainted by its use for war and enslavement (as seen already in Swift's Laputa!). In other words, societies where nothing basic is thinkable as being liable to change, such as China between the Tang and Qing dynasties, can at best dream of a Peach Blossom Country or a blessed island in a far-off sea, of Earthly Paradises that could be found in space. You may need to correct me, but I don't think this is the case with China today, either in ROC or in PRC. China seems in the grip of the capitalist-cum-socialist virus of living imaginatively in and/or for the future (where the profits will be). This is the horizon of much SF too. So if there is no strong SF tradition – though of course there is SF both on the Mainland and in Taiwan – there must be other, strictly cultural as well as economic reasons. Who would be the readers of SF? There are some investigations and hypotheses about US readers, which show that they are as a rule college-educated, upwardly mobile (or having that illusion), and within a middle social status (neither workers-farmers nor capitalists and managers). If you find a conjuncture of a minimum critical mass of such potential readers (say in six digits) plus efficient organs of dissemination (magazines, movie studios, radio-TV stations, paperback publishers), then you can start having a chance for SF – to be used or not according to talent.

My experience from (what I still persist to call) Yugoslavia is that the group of us very actively interested in SF was finally too small to matter. A good part of the population must be above threats to daily survival – in the USA in the best times this seems to have been about two-thirds – for any institutionalized "culture" except the most traditional forms to have a chance. In my essay "The Significant Context of Science Fiction" I analyzed UN statistics and came to the conclusion that over 90 percent of all books

produced and consumed in the world circulate in the politically and economically dominant "North" which has less than 25 percent of the world population. This was in 1971; the gap has widened since.

L: Let me pursue the point on Hollywood and censorship a little bit. Besides SF, you are also very much involved in the study of theatre. On the other hand, it appears that you have not been very enthusiastic about film or cinema. Can you comment on this? I mean, as the technologically progressive medium, film does seem to have some affinities with SF; for example, the dominance of realism in narrative cinema shows how much the medium depends on cognitive validity (Benjaminian mechanical reproduction). On the other hand, this is also a medium penetrated by industry, so that experimentation is much less important here than in theatre. You have linked theatre to SF because they are forms of "possible worlds." In this conception, what position would you give to cinema as a medium?

S: I am myself an active film buff, a pilgrim to all the *cinémathèques* from Zagreb, Paris, London and Yale (as a student) to Montréal and Tokyo or New York today. I didn't write about SF films for two reasons. I have mentioned the first in connection with Hollywood: it's frustrating to write continually about bad stuff, despite a few exceptions. The other reason is that, even a person with my rather wide and varied interests (and don't think I haven't been chastised and penalised for it by strict specialists!) must draw the line somewhere in terms of sheer energy and knowledge needed. But in all my grant applications for theatre theory research, I have always, quite sincerely, written that I deal with what Lessing called "dramaturgy", that is, something whose main outlines are applicable to any performable play – including movie, radio, TV, maybe even video (and future laser holograms). Of course, cartoons and movies are potentially the best chance for SF; this is I think proved by Chris Marker's *La jetée* or the Beatles' *Yellow Submarine*, at least marginal SF in my definition. But for that, they'd have to be taken away from the control of cartels and into the hands of citizens, something like the Canadian National Film Board before the recent budget cuts.

L: In other words, if we take away industrial control, you don't see much structural difference between film as a medium and other performable

plays, all in contradistinction to, say, written fiction. Is that what you mean? I can think of many differences between film and play, but I surely agree the sociology of production involved in film makes a big difference. Now, this also seems to be saying that movies as a medium have close affinities with the inherent nature of SF, except that it is distorted by the practical constraints of production. By contrast, written SF is (structurally, not just practically) compromised as a medium, and has to yield the "best chance" to film. I would like to know exactly what this unrealised "best chance" is? I don't suppose you are thinking of better access for the audience (for example, being more free from language barriers)?

S: I think there are two different points here. One is the sensual place that the different media occupy in respect to – let us say – the potentialities of people's imagination, and there I would actually not agree that written SF literature is compromised as a medium. On the contrary, I think that good writing is potentially at least equivalent to film or TV or any other electronic medium. Because if it is good, then by definition, it will create some equivalent to a film or play in your brain, and that is much more satisfactory than any director, I think, can make it. So the final horizons of writing are I think at least as encompassing and large as, if not larger than, those of visual media. But on the second level, given the present state of culture and civilisation where most people don't systematically read fiction and much less SF, media such as film and television are, sociologically or politically, the greatest chance of SF. If used intelligently, if not controlled by these "merchants of death" and so on, they would in that sense be the best chance for SF.

I am extremely impressed by the possibilities of cartoons and animated films and, as I said, I was extremely impressed by *The Yellow Submarine*, although it is not run-of-the-mill SF certainly, but it is a very kindred Possible World. But if one could do such things, if one had a group as creative as the Beatles and have as much financial support and so on, and then not one group but a dozen of them and do it systematically, then we would solve a number of problems, we would solve among other things the language barrier that you allude to, since it's much easier to subtitle a movie than to translate a story.

And even in acted movies, we have some examples (I mentioned *La jetée)* for latent possibilities. For example, though I don't like the *2001* movie too much for various reasons – and I have a problem with Arthur Clarke's SF too, this combination of technology and pseudomysticism – but the Kubrick movie has at least one great moment, which is the cut from the prehistoric man to the space station, where he throws up the bone used as a tool, and up comes the space station. Well, that, of course, even literature cannot do. Various other great moments are in the fantastic satirical grotesque of *Dr. Strangelove*, for example, when the airman rides the H-bomb down as a cowboy riding a steer in a Texas rodeo. So we have some indications that both the medium potentialities and the sociological potentialities of the cinema, including animated movie and cartoons, on the big screen and television, are huge – and I guess one should add, as I mentioned, video today, and very soon laser holograms or something. They are, however, strictly controlled by the financial establishment and the ideological establishment. That's why I said one would have to take it away and give it to citizens' groups. One would have to give it to a Mercury Theatre group as Orson Welles did in *Citizen Kane* or to Eisenstein's film group or whatever.

L: Is written literature, then, less prone to ideological manipulation?

S: No, no. It is at the moment sociopolitically much less important, because it is less consumed. And I think there is an empirical political "law" that the strictest vigilance in censorship of the establishment is always used against that medium which is dominant. When there was no written vernacular literature but only Latin, theatre was the mass medium and was strictly controlled. When written literature became pervasive in the nineteenth century, literature was strictly controlled; you have all these court cases from Flaubert to Joyce. When the radio was invented, and silent movies, literature very soon grew politically irrelevant; but then you censor radio and cinema very strongly. When television was invented, movies became less important. They are today censored more for economic than for ideological reasons, and the real censorship is in television. Now that is I think a kind of general law of repression in media: that it always shifts – not without battles, you still have to battle for *Ulysses* and *Lady Chatterley,*

but those were strictly lingering ideologies in the bad sense; the establishment doesn't really care.

L: To return to the issue of technology, I guess in asking about technology, my concern is mainly about the element of pleasure. May I say that in addition to the spirit of change, there must be some vehicle providing pleasure to carry that spirit through? This might be too binary, but if the pleasure of reading SF is linked to technology (sense of control, will to knowledge, etc., even masochistic fear of machines), perhaps we can think more about the position of SF in relation to social space, power, etc., at least to know better the mechanism of cooptation you refer to. For example, there is a large community of computer engineers in Taiwan, even some sort of a hackers' subculture. But I can hardly imagine a native cyberpunk emerging out of all this, because the professional (English) vocabulary used in this community has no connection with the "real" language used by the same people. We do have stories written more or less in the cyberpunk style, but mostly written as literary exercises. I mean, people here can imitate or "import" a subgenre form the West, but in this case, wouldn't this imported thing be different from the subgenre as written in the original context?

S: Well, I don't know what's happening in Taiwan and China, and I know a little bit but not too much of what's happening in Japanese SF. You say that the professional English vocabulary used by the native hackers' community has no connection with the language they themselves use otherwise. But if this is so, which I don't doubt if you tell me so, I don't think it can stay so for very long. I think that, in five or ten or fifteen years (I don't know how long it takes), this specialised hackers' language will have to be integrated into some kind of pidgin Chinese or it will get lost. It may then only be used by professional technicians and so on, but if it is to be a real subcultural language, it will be creolised. And at that point, when it is integrated, you can begin really to write representative stories. Up to then it's going to be imitation, which is not bad – to begin by imitation. If you learn drawing, you begin by imitation. If you learn piano, you begin by finger exercises. Maybe what they are doing is finger exercises. It's not very original, but you have to start with something.

So I think there is an international professional class, a social fraction, whatever you want to call it: the hackers, the media people, and so on. And their social status is very interesting. They are professionally powerful; they are politically powerless. They are usually well paid; they are usually more intelligent than the people who employ them. They are partly disaffected. It's in some ways similar to what Raymond Williams says about the Bloomsbury fraction. The disaffected part of the upper class, so to speak, or here of the upwardly mobile middle class. That's a very interesting position, culturally very fertile. Most great cultural works are written by such people. If you look at the social position of Shakespeare, he became a rich gentleman who had (I think) three shares in his theater, yet in many ways he was disaffected. We could go on with this: Tolstoy would also be a wonderful example. So the hackers, etc., have something to contribute to this discourse of our times. And they did for a little while in the USA, with cyberpunk – but this is over. Now this partly depends on the traditions of the genre, which means the traditions of the readers. If you have no tradition of reading SF in Taiwan, it's going to be very difficult. If a real readership doesn't develop quickly, so that there is feedback, stimulating these writers – it doesn't have to be very big, but it has to be there, a little subculture. So I don't think it's entirely a matter of technological level. It is tied in, obviously, with technology but it's a matter of social, psychological orientation. It is very mysterious why SF develops in some cultures. For example, if it were tied to the level of technology, Germany was traditionally one of the highest developed technological cultures; it never had good SF, for ideological and various other reasons which are superadded to the level of technology. So technology or, let us say, a social class whose interests are wedded to the use of technology, is the necessary but not sufficient condition.

L: Perhaps we can talk a little bit about plays.

S: Yes. Which is my main interest, of course.

L: One thing that strikes me is that there seem to be no SF plays.

S: Very few. There are some.

L: Is it because of technical limitations?

S: Partly. It was, at least in naturalist theatre, very expensive to make backdrops suggesting very estranged places and so on. There are, of

course, if we go through the actually existing stuff – there is *R.U.R.* by Čapek; there are a few plays by Shaw, which happen in the far future, like *Back to Methuselah*. So there are a number of utopian/dystopian satirical, or similar, plays. There is a book written on this in the States, utopian/dystopian drama, by Dragan Klaić, a countryman of mine. There is Mayakovski's work *Mystery Bouffe*, arising from the Russia of the Bolshevik Revolution, and two subsequent plays of his which could be called SF plays. So it is possible to do it. They are usually satirical, near-future plays. But I think the dominant mode of theatre, what Brecht called the Aristotelian theatre, that is to say the theatre concentrated on psychological empathy into relationships of people on the stage, of course has nothing to do with SF; SF, one critic said, is not interested in mariners out of Joseph Conrad but in Gulliver, not in the nonexistent "psychology" of Gulliver but in his relationship to these strange places he encountered. So this runs against the dominant Hollywood-style, Broadway-style theatre. I have not solved this question. As you may imagine, I have been thinking a lot about why there are relatively few SF plays. Is it just because of superadded ideological protocols in a certain type of drama? Is it something in the nature of theatre? I tend to think it's the first one.

I saw, for example, a production of *The Tempest* at Yale when I was a student there, which was transformed into an SF story. Instead of a shipwreck, it had a spaceship wreck. And there were no problems. The strange creatures, Ariel and Caliban, are obviously two races on that planet and so on; it worked very well. It is a little bit strange to have SF in the words of Shakespeare, of course, but much less strange than with the words of Ibsen. So I tend to think the stage could do it. But it has never really had the chance to do it. And the actual representation of non-human creatures used to give technical problems (also psychological, probably) to the naturalistic stage. It would be no technical problem at all today, with lighting and the various computerized facilities we have; and it would be no big psychological problem, I think, no bigger problem than the ghosts in Shakespeare, Hamlet's father and so on. But more important, on a deeper level, I have always claimed – perhaps this is professional idiocy – that for me, the SF world and the stage world are basically almost identical. They are little space-time islands, right? Every

stage world that we wish to imagine, we can imagine as a little space-time island, like a science-fictional world except that it's usually supposed to be realistically verisimilar …

L: How is that different from, say, the little world represented in a novel?

S: It's more concentrated on the stage, just as it's more concentrated in SF. You've got to explain the particular world very quickly. In the first act of a European drama the servants usually come in and say, ah, this is the house of so-and-so and there's just been a marriage, just as you've got to explain, in the first chapter of a SF, the sociopolitical and physical and cosmic presuppositions of the story. As I said, this may be just a professional idiosyncrasy of mine, but I've always had this very strong feeling that we necessarily imagine it as little Einsteinian cosmic islands. That's the way I think of the stage and that's the way I think of SF. That's not the way I think of a Dostoevsky novel. The *Brothers Karamazov* has so many connections with the readers of Dostoevsky's time, their realities: with Siberia, with the Russian soul, with the streets of St. Petersburg. It is not a thing apart, whereas in a "realistic" play, it's so different: the streets you don't see, you always see a drawing room – It's such a cliché, convention, an enclosed and concentrated space just like a spaceship. It's an icon, a bourgeois salon.

L: So it has to do with the fixity of the scene, the stage.

S: It has to do with the monadic character, the rounded, globed character, as it were –

L: But doesn't the audience also have to imagine what lies outside the stage?

S: Of course, they must imagine. Basically this subtends all reading, be it newspapers or realistic novels, and also all story-telling, but it's not so obvious, it's not so foregrounded, I think, in realistic drama. At least for me, there has never been any kind of conflict between my interest in drama and theatre, which is my basic professional orientation, and my interest in SF for which people tend to know me better, somewhat to my chagrin since it is my second violin as it were. And maybe a clue might be given to you by the fact that I'm very appreciative of some simplified versions of

the Possible Worlds theory, which is exactly what I was talking about, the same approach, the same topology of little closed-off worlds, seemingly closed-off but really in dialogue with us.

L: Your point reminds me of the attention paid to the structural presence of the screen in film theory. What strikes me is that in film theory people usually emphasise that film is two-dimensional, a question of images within a frame.

S: I do not traffic in film theory and I only know the rudiments of it. Roland Barthes said that theatre was a cybernetic machine, he was exactly right. And so is film, and so is literature, only not so obviously foregrounded, not so photographable – you can actually go into a theatre and photograph this machine working, the stage and the audience, whereas it's not possible to photograph a novel working as a cybernetic machine and it's a bit more difficult with the film. If you accept the kind of approach to theatre which I'm trying to work out and which has, on the one hand, the possible world on the stage and, on the other hand, the cybernetic feedback from the imagination of the spectator, and if you would then try to apply it to movies, which I have never done and doubt that I will do, but which in principle I think should be done, then I don't see so much difference as the theory of the two-dimensional frame would imply, because the two dimensions, in the feedback, in the imagination of the spectator, obviously would become three-dimensional. Our minds would fill it in, and think that we are moving together with the camera …

L: But the audience cannot control the camera in any way …

S: That's true. That's the big difference. That the theatre is a real cybernetic feedback, where you know the audience will, in ways that every actor understands, by starting to cough or shifting in seats and so on – there is a certain aura, there is a certain degree of warmth – it will send constant correction signals to the actors. This you cannot do with television as we have it today, before we get a two-way response system, which we could have gotten 50 years ago but those in power didn't want it, for political reasons. So when I said there was a cybernetic feedback in movies I was obviously wrong literally. There is a guidance, activation, stimulation, of the spectatorial imagination, which does in my opinion turn the two-dimensional into three-dimensional. If you were literally to

look at the movie screen as two-dimensional, the possibilities of action, of following the events would collapse, because the two-dimensional surface doesn't allow people to walk into the distance or whatever. So I have my doubts. I think the way the camera angle shifts, the way the spectator is guided and directed, is much more stringent and subtle and difficult to avoid than in theatre, but not because it's two-dimensional. In the theatre you today really buy a particular seat, but theoretically you could go to another place in the auditorium to look at the stage. And traditionally in theatre before the bourgeoisie, say the groundlings in Shakespeare, you could move wherever you wanted, left, right, back and front, and see the action from various angles, and of course modern theatre has begun to do this again. So in that sense there is more audience freedom in the theatre and much less in the movies. But the movie has some strengths, it can calculate its effects more precisely.

L: In that sense, written fiction would be close to movies, because it is also prewritten?

S: In that sense, yes. But since it is not visualised – the way words stimulate pictures in our minds is still very poorly understood, but obviously there is a great range of variation. When an author says that X sat down in a chair you can imagine seventeen types of chairs, whereas in a movie you can only imagine the one that you see: it's a high-backed chair with, say, yellow cushions; there's nothing else you can imagine. In literature, it can be as precise or as little precise as the particular text makes it.

L: So in this second sense, theatre resembles movies more than written fiction, right?

S: In that sense yes, but one would have to find all the senses and just how they all add up. There are two main traditions in world theatre so far as I know – and I have been working on this cross-cultural stuff. The main European tradition is what we technically call the logocratic theatre, theatre based on the word, from Shakespeare on let's say. The main East Asian tradition is the scenocratic tradition, where the stage is more important than words and usually the story is clichetised, the characters are clichetised, and the actual stage virtuosity, the emotional effect, is the important thing in a noh play, in a kabuki play, in all Chinese "operas." So it would depend on the type of theatre.

L: How did you come to take theatre as your primary interest?

S: Since I studied literature – when I was a student there were no theatre studies – it had to be drama, and I was trained to analyse drama texts, not to analyse performance. Nobody trained in that. I had to learn this all by myself, slowly and painfully. So my early work is all drama analysis, but at the same time, I was a theatre critic, and wrote in newspapers, daily, weekly, monthly ones, where you have to see the play in the evening and a short critique has to be in the newspaper office next noon. And much later, after I came to North America, I tried to fuse these, in other words, make really substantial performance analyses. I have done a few. The underlying reasons? Well, first of all, I was in the student theatre. When I was a student, I was its dramaturge, I chose the plays or texts to adapt. From time to time I acted, only when I had to, when somebody got sick or what not – still, I was in the theatre, I was behind the stage, behind the scenes. There is something utopian about the theatre as an institution, I have argued that even theoretically the theatre is a kind of semi-numinous institution. This has been my presupposition; it was nullified by ideology in the nineteenth century, but even then something remained. That is to say, there is a direct, central imaginative relationship, of a very strange kind, not only between the actors on the stage but, more importantly, between the stage as a metonymy and the audience as another metonymy, or allegorical personification if you wish. This is something which is, of course, becoming more and more difficult in mass, alienated society, any type of direct, central imaginative and yet collective and public relationship. A number of movements on the left and the right tried to reinvent it. It drove mass rallies at the Nazi Nuremberg meetings, what Brecht called the theatralics of fascism. There were similar things in Stalinism, Maoism, etc. – in fact, in all popular gatherings and festivities. This may have been perverted but the basic impulse – you have a kind of traffic right there, in a humanly manageable way, not simply directed from above, a feedback appreciated by all lovers of plebeian democracy, from Rousseau to the early Bolsheviks and Brecht. This seems to me extremely valuable, and the theatre is a very charming institution.

I think the basic message, the meta-message of the stage is: I can show you this world or I can show you that world, I can show anything you wish. I can show you a Shakespeare world, I can show an Ibsen world, I can show

you a kabuki world. There is no limit to this. This is the meta-message. The message is saying this world is such and such, but the meta-message or presupposition is that you freely agree to choose your model worlds. The stage is a kind of model, or counter-model. Either you should do this or you should not do this, what you see on the stage. So that is I think the utopian element. It is literally a no-place. It pretends to be a bourgeois drawing-room but it's not really. It's a *u-topos*. And the ontological, epistemological status of this stage is very strange. It's a kind of double ontology, at the same time 50 square meters which an architect made and also the castle of Elsinore, and it moves between these two views all the time.

L: In your *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, you wanted to propose a general poetics of SF (SF as cognitive estrangement, hegemonic novum, relevance to historical present, etc.). I suppose that many people today would find such a project excessively normative. There are various ways to defend it, but some questions still remain. For example, what is the status of "bad SF", especially when it is popular? Does "high" SF share this popular element?

S: Is *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* "normative"? Yes and no. I think *homo sapiens sapiens* (dare one say man?) is a norm-creating animal, there's no way out of that. Nihilism is only useful insofar as it destroys norms which deserve that (Nietzsche, Beckett), and quite useless insofar as it pretends there are no norms. The only choice we have is between (1) better and worse norms; (2) single and plural norms. Somewhere around the time of the Industrial Revolution (1) and (2) became interchangeable, that is, monotheism doesn't work anymore at a time of observably rapid change for each generation. It would be fair critique to say that *Metamorphoses* suffers from some lingering aftereffects of monotheism. Being always deeply persuaded that history is real and social groups are real too, therefore all value-systems are specific, surely I tried to avoid it, but that was difficult to avoid for one brought up in a post-Christian civilisation. Today, after the experiences of, say, the last 20 years, we can all see that more clearly. Shintoist polytheism is much better; Daoist atheism but not non-normativity (its original impulse, as I understand it) still better. I was a few days ago summoned to explain my ideological horizon, and the best I could do was: Shintoist cybermarxist.

All of this is to say that at any particular moment in sociohistorical spacetime there are, for given purposes, to my mind still (however flexible and complex) normative systems which enable us to say that John Jakes and Dean Koontz – before they thank the gods stopped writing SF and moved into their proper niche of bestsellers – wrote bad SF, whereas Marge Piercy or Octavia Butler write good SF. Furthermore, the first novel by William Gibson was good whereas the succeeding ones are less and less good, alas. So in a way, if Post-Modernism means no norms (I truly hope it doesn't), then I'm an impenitent Modernist, with Brecht, Picasso, Joyce, and Eisenstein – and Lao Tze, maybe the one out of Brecht's poem on him – *contra mundum*. Would "many people" (as you diplomatically say), that is, the Post-Modernist hegemony in the Western universities today, consider this excessive? Well, but I was always an Ibsenian "enemy of the people" in the sense of the solid bourgeois majority. So this is not a new role for me. In fact, it warms me.

What is the status of bad SF? I have two answers. Medieval Scholastics taught us that "the corruption of the best is the worst." Marx teaches us that illusory beliefs are "the opium of the people, the heart of the heartless world" – note that this was written after the Opium Wars against China but that in Europe opium was a medicament taken against great suffering by people who could afford it. A totally disempowered woman may glean out of Scarlett O'Hara a (very partly) useful role model, and who are we (momentarily) privileged intellectuals to begrudge people in a heartless world a little laudanum? But it's better to consider a different Possible World – for example, a heart operation. And if something pretending to a difference is in fact stale old meat in a new sauce – say, a western with rayguns and monsters instead of six-shooters and Indians; or a primitive fairy tale with good guys in white and bad guys in black, such as *Star Wars* – then the theological norm as above applies.

L: Can you explain the term "cybermarxist"?

S: "Shintoist cybermarxist." It's a semi-joke, but semi only.

L: So what's the serious part?

S: Well, the serious part is that you have to update Marxism. For example, the metaphor of base and superstructure comes from civil engineering, road building and bridge building, where you do physically have a

base and a superstructure. It is not fully useful anymore. Today, we have better metaphors such as cybernetic feedback. I am also alluding partly to the "Cyborg Manifesto" by Donna Haraway, and partly to my interest in cyberpunk SF, and so on. So this semi-joke is a semi-indication that I think there are some lessons of Marxism which should not be given up, central cognitive lessons about labour, class contradictions, etc., that I hold to. I don't think they are superseded, and I agree with Sartre and Jameson that this remains the horizon of our thinking. Epistemically, as long as capitalism exists, we can't abandon it.

[July 1994: correcting this interview, I wish to add a paragraph on Derrida's latest book just out, *Specters of Marx*. In it, Derrida wishes to reactualize the lesson of "a certain Marx," most urgent in face of the new consensus that glosses over its spreading "plagues": "never on Earth have so many men, women, and children been enslaved, starved or exterminated." I am very happy with the horizon that intellectuals have responsibilities toward suffering people and economic justice. Derrida's appeals for a "new International" is here a key strategic move. It is, however, not clear how he envisages his "alliance … without coordination, without party, … without institutions" could effect "a (theoretical and practical) critique" of such matters as "the concepts of State and nation." Surely at least a loosely linked (to begin with telematic) focusing of cognitive forces is a precondition for any impact beyond evanescent academic effervescence. For a "practical critique" to intertwine with lectures and books, intermittent and non-hibernating groups (and what else are, for example, the Deconstructionists?) and institutions (to begin with, probably teaching centers and publications) and a solidarity around concrete, democratically chosen objectives seems absolutely needed.]

L: So how does Shintoism come into the picture?

S: Shintoism because it's polytheism, it has 80 myriad gods. One major problem with the European tradition is that it is monotheistic and unfortunately Marxism was infected by monotheism, the cult of the one divine being.

L: I don't know about Shintoism but in Chinese religion we also have polytheisms, but these are polytheisms with hierarchies, so there is always one figure at the top …

S: Yes. Well, I'm surely rewriting this in my own imagination for my own purposes. Shinto is a bit more flexible, though the imperial clan in Japan eventually, when it became predominant over other clans, claimed descent from the Sun deity, Amaterasu, and rewrote the mythology, so that the Sun deity is also there the highest, and it's somewhat hierarchical, but never totally so (except the so-called State Shinto after the 1860s). Actually, I could have said Daoist, instead of Shintoist. Daoism is still better; it has no gods at all. But you know I'm a poet; it's more precise, concrete, to give what Shakespeare called a local habitation and a name to all these gods. I can imagine a deity of my poetry, the *kami*, what the Greeks called the muse. I can with difficulty imagine a road telling me how to write poetry, so I have some imagistic problems with Daoism; otherwise, it's much more interesting. I mean, better than monotheism is polytheism and better than polytheism is atheism. But it's more difficult to talk about it, and also I know more about Shinto since I've been studying Japanese culture. So when I made that joke it was because of my immediate sphere of interest.

L: Let me push the question a little bit. The other day, after your lecture on Noh, Professor Gao Tianen asked you a question about Buddhism. I think that question has something to do with our discussion here: if you are a materialist, but at the same time you are also interested in questioning reality in general, always asking why this or that is necessarily so, then, how do you reconcile the two perspectives?

S: Oh, I don't have any problems with that myself. I don't doubt that there is a reality, though each social group sees it in partly different ways, and in some limited ways each of us is a peculiar recombination of social groupings – a permeable group of one, as it were. I only doubt whether reality is good, and whether it should be changed, and I think it is usually not very good and it could and should be changed. But idealism – including much Buddhism, not all in my opinion, not the original Buddhism, which was atheistic really – but much what passes today and in the last two thousand years for Buddhism, basically downgrades and denies the body and the present existence as an unfortunate mistake which should lead to nirvana as soon as possible. I don't share that. To say it's really a horrible misfortune to be born, even as a man, never mind a dog or woman or

something: I can very well understand the reasons for that disgust, and I prefer Buddha to Christ. He was after all a prince, so it's a princely religion that is disgusted with the petty, the horrible suffering. I can understand the motive forces of Buddhism: much of life is really so horrible and disgusting as classical Buddhism finds it. I agree with that. To say that, therefore, one should get rid of it as soon as possible doesn't follow. The other possibility is one should improve it.

L: I think it's possible to recognise the necessity to change reality without accepting that very reality; I mean, even if you are an idealist –

S: Well, you know all of us are limited by our upbringing and culture, and I cannot see that. At most I can see the theoretical possibility that some of us could see it, but I myself cannot see it. But let me say, as I said to Professor Gao, that I have a real curiosity and a lively desire to know more about three great metaphysical traditions in Asia. There must be more, but I'm interested in the Buddhist one, the Daoist one, and the Shintoist one. Now, being too old, I shall never fully understand them, but one can learn from them anyway.

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"I Have No Soul And I Must Laugh or Cry": Interview on SF and Traveling with Tami Hager[3] (1995)

HAGER: The first question is about the connection between travelling in science fiction and travelling geographically. You travel constantly and you have read lots of SF …

SUVIN: [*makes modest noises*]

H: Is there any connection, is there some parallel between travel and SF?

3 The interview was conducted in Tel Aviv, March 1995, for a local geographic and travel periodical. It was to my knowledge never published. It has been slightly edited for this publication.

s: My argument would be that there are two levels in SF, the level of thematic focusing and then what the Russian Formalists call the *motivirovka* or justification (it's not psychological motivation) of that theme. That would, in significant SF at least, make the travel part as a rule relatively unimportant. The travel belongs to the framework which sets important things in motion: but what is important is what you find when you come there. There may be some exceptions, of course, where the finding happens on a spaceship during travel; but in that case usually the space in the spaceship itself is somehow changed, for example, it grows into a hydroponic jungle – I'm thinking of Brian Aldiss's early novels, and there are some similar pioneering stories by Heinlein, it was really popular at some point. In Aldiss's novel there is some kind of mutiny or explosion in a huge spaceship, miles and miles long, and hundreds of years later the nth generation has forgotten that they were on a spaceship, they think this is their world. The hydroponic plants have escaped from the lab and grown all over into a jungle. Different tribes developed on various parts of the spaceship (in the States they made a TV program based on this idea). So the people don't know they are travelling. The hero, a kind of Columbus, finds out that they are on a spaceship and goes through various adventures, finally finding the captain's room. Through windows he sees the stars. For him this is a huge surprise, since the inhabitants of the ship don't know that there is something beyond their "universe."

This story seems to me in some ways an emblem of SF. The travelling has, as I called it in my *Metamorphoses*, an ontolytic effect. That is, it dissolves your perception of reality, in order that you may replace it with a new perception. The dissolving itself is necessary and sometimes maybe pleasant, but it's a means to an end. So, if the readers of your journal are the kind of people who are actually interested in driving by car or bus for ten hours and looking out at the landscape, then I think the analogies with SF travel would be relatively small. If they are, however, like me: I am bored to tears with travel, I just want to get there, then analogous interests might exist. My favorite means of travel would be Aladdin's lamp – you rub the lamp and you're there, so you wouldn't have to go through the airport, and wait there, sit for hours in the uncomfortable chairs, and so on. I can very well see that the process of travelling can be very pleasurable

for some people. Why not? But I myself, maybe because I've done much of it, although probably less than some of your readers – I'm not interested in travel *per se*. I travel because I want to go to places like Rome, Israel or Japan, because I have an interest in these places.

T: Isn't the real travelling about knowing different new worlds?

S: Well, the interesting part is what you find there once you arrive. Now are you asking about the civic *persona* of Darko Suvin or about SF?

H: Both. I think there are similarities. I think that people who have interest in SF are interested in other worlds.

S: Yes, but you can do this in an armchair … you don't have to travel. People interested in SF are not necessarily interested in physical travelling. In fact, it might be considered an alternative, instead of travelling you read SF. So I think it depends on the kind of individual. One should do a sociological study about the correlation between science-fiction reading and travel. It would be interesting to know whether there is a correlation. I would imagine that SF could either push you to travel because it stimulates your interest in other places, or on the contrary it could inhibit it because you'd say: I do all of it in my reading. What is interesting for me in SF is the image of different and yet possible worlds, which in literary theory we put into capitals, PW. One of the basic techniques to write a SF novel – usually not a shorter story but a novel – is to choose the formula of the travel, the quest, so that you traverse a certain territory, and while traversing it you also begin to understand some central matters about it: what kind of being/s is/are living in it? What kind of laws exist in it, or what kind of social organization? Whatever puzzle is hidden in that territory, you begin to understand it by travelling through it, which is a very old technique, not invented by SF, but invented by previous types of fiction.

H: Like *Don Quixote*?

S: For example *Don Quixote*, that is to say the *picaro* adventures underlying it. But I think it's much older than that. You have it in late Hellenic literature, in Apollodorus, for example. Why? In my opinion because it is based on, or it is correlative to, the central conceit or *topos* or metaphor of the Road of Life, Dao for the Chinese. It's a Way, with capital W. So that your travelling through space is somehow connected,

metaphorico-analogically, with travelling in time – this was even theorized in *The Time Machine*. So this is the case in *Wilhelm Meister*, in *Don Quixote*, and in a number of famous eighteenth-century English novels, like *Tom Jones*. And it certainly is the case in SF now. Personally, of course, all of us travel on the road of life. Some of us are more conscious of the metaphor than others. I am very conscious; my book of poetry, written in imitation of the Chinese style, is called *The Long March*: a title not merely owed to Mao Zedong, but to the road of life. Actually, I was thinking of Raymond Williams when I chose it.

Why do I translate my time into space? I don't know, of course, why do we do what we do, why do we choose a profession, fall in love, you just know it happens. However, once it happens you can retrospectively try to understand some of it. That's why we hear sentences like: "Oh my god, how could I make that terrible mistake," or "It went so well, how did I manage to do it?" …

There are extrinsic reasons why to travel. For example, one is kicked out from a country; in Israel you should know a lot about it. Such a thing enforces travelling by necessity, usually not in pleasant ways. This happened to me a couple of times in my life. Once when I was a very small boy, not so small as to be unconscious, especially since you tend to grow up quickly during stress. And that was during the World War, when in Yugoslavia my family and I had to leave my native city, Zagreb, since our life as officially Jews was threatened in the German-occupied zone, and cross to the Italian-occupied zone, because the Italians were more easily bribed, not so obsessed by "race" or in general not so well organized. So we travelled to an island, and in Fall 1943, when Italy collapsed, my father joined the partisans, and my mother and I went by a little fishing boat to Southern Italy, which was at that point liberated. The islands had been liberated by Tito's partisans and were being evacuated of non-combatants because the Germans were coming South, down the coast. We travelled in a very crowded boat, with 300 refugees. We ran away among minefields, with bombers overhead, who didn't bomb us because we were not worth bombing, but it was not exactly pleasant.

The second time it happened to me in a much more gilded way, but still not entirely pleasant. I left Yugoslavia in 1967, to go to the States at first,

and a year later to Canada. My wife and I went to the States by ship. The ship docked at Montréal actually, the first time I saw Montréal. We had one big wooden trunk, like nineteenth-century immigrants to America …

H: The same that you see in movies when immigrants arrive to Ellis Island?

S: Yes, yes, exactly. In the trunk we had our winter coats and winter shoes – and books. And then from Montréal we took a train to Albany, I went to a job in Amherst, Massachussets, a nice small place with a big university. So this was another emigration. The ex-Yugoslav government called my emigration an economic one, as different from political emigration.

H: Was it because in Yugoslavia they didn't have any work for you?

S: Well, it was because I had a big quarrel at the Zagreb University and I resigned, and yes I left under the category of trying to find work somewhere else. It was legal, with a passport, and it wasn't on a crowded little boat. No, my wife and I had our own, very tight little cabin. But still, it was an existential shift, I wasn't travelling for pleasure.

So this category I call extrinsic, and please don't take the term seriously because I have just invented it, I'm sure I could find a better term; but it's enforced travel, it's an existential shift, and unfortunately it characterizes not only Jews but millions of people in this century. Whole populations were shunted back and forth, and millions of individuals. This is a completely different existential experience than the intrinsic or inner-directed travel, that is, you travel because you like it and you want to see things. It may be done out of general curiosity. When Edmund Hillary was asked why go up the Everest, he answered: "because it's there."

So you go to Greece because it's there, in other words, Greece is not something that you could experience in most other places. Each individual has her/his preferences where to go and what to do there. When I finished studying in England, in Summer 1955, I hitchhiked from Scotland to Naples. It was very pleasant. You meet people and you see places. If any of your readers like this type of travelling, I don't see any reason why they shouldn't. Personally, at some point when you live in Canada, and have six months of minus 20–30, then there arises in the Welfare State a very

good habit that, at some time between the beginning of December and the middle of January, almost everybody goes South: to the Caribbean, to Mexico, to Florida maybe – I myself wouldn't be caught dead in Florida. I went a number of times to Cancun and Puerto Vallarta and Jamaica and Barbados, etc. But I must say that I was always feeling a bit uncomfortable. Usually you go for ten or twelve days, and that's fair enough. You have some company, your spouse or your partner: if you are me, you have lots of writings with you and you even may write something there; and you swim. And you may have one or two guided tours, to the local waterfalls or whatever, and for ten or twelve days this is bearable, but just barely. Because I am aware that the army is patrolling the hotel, and that outside there are a lot of people who hate me because I'm rich and they're poor. Although in fact I'm not rich, but for them, if I can come on an airplane and live in a hotel, I'm rich, quite rightly. This is not a terrifically comfortable way of living, nor am I comfortable in that position. I've never been on the upper scale of either power or economics, and I think there's something alienating about it. If I have to choose between that and sleeping on the street, I would rather be rich, but I think both are rather alienating. So I don't like this type of tourism, and in the last fifteen years I have rather endured minus 30 than go to Guadeloupe.

H: That's interesting.

S: Well, I was also busy, and I saved all my travelling for the Summer. There were all kinds of reasons, but basically I was rather uncomfortable, being a socialist. It was not simply an "ideological" thing. It was just looking at people and knowing that they must hate you, and rightly so. They must, because they live in corrugated tin shacks. So, if your readers could go to Martinique or Barbados, I would say yes of course! It's beautiful, it's absolutely stunning. But do understand that there is an underside, and at some point, if you have a little bit of consciousness, it will begin bothering you. It begins bothering me about the 10th or 11th day and I'm happy that on the 12th day I'm leaving. So that kind of travelling is really over for me at present – unless it were something that I had never seen. Yes, of course, I would love to go to Angkor Vat, or to Singapore, or to Indonesia, or to Australia, or to South Africa, where I have never been, but three days are enough.

H: So you get to places because of conferences?

S: In a conference I don't have time to get out of the hotel. But yes, three days before or after a conference. So what kind of travelling is really inner-directed, and is it of a superior sort? There is tourism, which is fine, but I think it is not the highest form. The highest form for me is to get to know a little bit deeper – even though you cannot pretend to really know it fully and deeply – some other ways of people living together, which is usually called cultures, no?

H: This is your interest in Japan?

S: Yes. Although I had the same feeling when I first came to New York.

H: So in your life it is a repeated experience?

S: Yes, you are absolutely right. One of the ways of explaining Japan to myself is that it is halfway to the Moon.

H: Really? That's interesting!

S: Well, it's the nearest to a science-fictional place that you can find on this globe. It's so different.

H: And didn't you have the same feeling when you switched from Yugoslavia to the States?

S: But I studied at Yale.

H: I mean the first time you landed there?

S: Oh when I first came to New York and then Yale? Well, I had already seen a lot of Hollywood movies. Of course, it was strange in many ways. You have to understand I believe in the Monroe doctrine, that America is for the Americans. Which doesn't mean that I hate America, I don't like Europeans who live off America and go around foul-mouthing it – Adorno, for example. I think there's something unfair in that. But it's not my place, and I didn't make it mine, and their problems are thank god not mine, because their problems are awful: a dying empire, quite suicidal.

I came to Japan at a different set of existential premises in my life, it was not enforced either by scholarship or by exile, it was really my choice. I could have just as well lived without it, I didn't need it for my tenure, in fact it cost me money, so it was really an act of intellectual love, so to speak.

H: And it was like going to the Moon?
S: Halfway. Because obviously the physical situation is the same as everywhere else, and people are people, they have one head and not two heads, two hands and not four hands or tentacles or something, so it's not quite SF. And yet the whole system, not only the writing – which gives me some problems in Israel too – but much more than that, the system of cultural presuppositions which underlies people's behavior towards you, was really strange, even for one who has lived in a number of places all over the so-called Western world: from a periphery like Yugoslavia and Italy (my favourite country) to Paris and England, where I studied, and all over the States. I've been in the tropics, as a tourist, and I've been more or less all over Europe. And it has never hit me so, except once when I went to China – as different from Hong Kong, where I've been several times. Hong Kong is not real China because most people I meet know English, all my friends there talk English.

In a way, what is so strange about Japan, is first tied to the fact that I've been there long enough to begin really getting into it – which was not the case in China, or in India where I also visited briefly. But furthermore, it is that a number of civilization facilities, the buildings, the streets, the streetcars, and so on, are the same as in any major city (I mainly live in Tokyo when I go to Japan). So in fact the Japanese, as all other Asians will tell you, are the most Westernized of the Asians; and yet, although they have lots of neon signs, like any big city in the world, these signs are all in an unreadable script. I think the paradox of Japan is that you can recognize the genus but not the species. You know it's a dog, but I've never seen this dog species. Therefore the halfway to the Moon is so interesting. If it was wholly the Moon you would say: this is so strange, but I cannot understand it, it's a freak or it freaks out the visitor. But of course the Japanese are not in the Moon, they have one head and not two heads, sexual equipment of the same kind, etc. The mixture of the familiar and the strange is what makes it really strange: if it were totally strange you would just blank out, you would not understand anything, you would say "Oh my god, let me run back to the hotel and get the guide!" You would be in an existential panic.

H: It struck me before we started talking that to understand Japan needs the same technique used to understand SF. In your books you said that SF is a mix of the strange with the familiar and now you apply the same expression to Japan.

S: Yes, but those situations are different. Reading a book, you are in your comfortable study, while visiting Japan you are immersed in the strange reality. The difference is that the books are in you, but you are in Japan. I took apartments in Japan, I had to buy food, I had to buy toilet paper, I went to the saké pubs. I did these things with my extremely primitive, rudimentary, and no doubt totally impolite Japanese, without the proper honorific suffixes and all that. I therefore really had some occasions to be more than a tourist, because I never go to a hotel in Japan, unless it is to visit visiting Americans. When a great US professor like Jameson comes to Japan, I visit him in a hotel. But I myself couldn't afford it, and I'm not interested in it. If I want to stay in a hotel, I can just as well stay at home! So the presuppositions for their life, for their relationships to each other and the universe, suddenly reveal themselves to me in very little details – and they are different. Therefore you begin questioning your own presuppositions which up to that point you possibly haven't known that you have – you practically have them but you never thought about it.

H: But doesn't SF have the same function, namely, to question your own presuppositions?

S: There are two possibilities. Either Japan is similar to SF or the observer brings the same categories to both, you decide which, I don't know.

H: I think Japan is similar to SF.

S: I would say myself that it's a mixture of both. I don't think I invented it totally, either in the case of SF or of Japan, on the other hand I obviously have a certain stance …

H: Maybe it is the researcher in you, who likes questioning yourself and your culture?

S: Yes, but it's also a peculiar stance which not every researcher has. I know many very good researchers who have a different stance, that wants to know more of the same. My stance is conditioned by my whole life-history and what I went through. I have acquired a certain stance, though surely it is not absolutely unique, in fact I think each of its elements exists somewhere else, but the way that they are brought together may be peculiar to me.

At any rate, suddenly you begin to realize that you have certain presuppositions; and second, you begin to think "why do I have these

presuppositions?" The way I can best describe it to you is to refer to an overall hypothesis which I made in an article on Barthes's approach to Japan, in *The Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* for December 1991, and my title was "The Soul and the Sense." For, the basic realization that struck me in Japan, where people have sense – in many senses of that word, from sensual to making sense – is that *I had a soul*, which I thought I had evacuated when I became an atheist at age 13. But in fact I found out that what I had evacuated was the name of the soul and maybe some external areas of it, but at the center – the center, which is this little billiard ball that exists somewhere inside you apparently – there was still "le Moi" as Descartes would say. And since it's not fashionable to be religious we call it the Self, or if you are a Freudian the Ego, but this totally hangs together with and is derived from the monotheistic Jewish-Christian-Islamic idea of some kind of personal essence. Now in East Asia they have never had the necessity to imagine a creator, and therefore never had a soul, or they never had a soul and therefore they never had the necessity to imagine a creator. They either had a self-sustaining creation, which shouldn't be called creation, because there is no creator – the Way, the Road, the Dao; or they had eighty myriad kami, local deities, and so it comes to the same: there is no gentleman with a white beard up there correlative to souls.

So though I had fortunately jettisoned the Father, it seems I unwittingly remained a Son. That was quite a shock to me, and it put into question a great number of fundamental, central, basic or important things in our culture and in my understanding of it. For example, one of the problems of old-style Marxism, I think, is that it was too monotheistic. It not only culminated in the so-called cult of the personality of Stalin, but there is a problem when Marx says there are "iron laws," in the preface to *Capital*. The concept of iron laws comes from Newton, roughly – and Newton was a believing Christian, he believed that God made the universe and there are some laws to it. He then made them into laws of physics, being an eighteenth-century Englishman … I am not saying there are no regularities. I'm not saying we shouldn't talk about laws, but we should know where the concept of law, "lex," comes from. It comes from Roman jurisprudence and monotheistic theology (even if philosophers like to talk about the Greek word "logos"). But "the laws of nature" is a concept Newton or Marx could not have formulated

unless there were the concept of laws, and the concept of laws comes from Roman law and from monotheistic theology. I am working further on this.

So you begin asking yourself, "Why?" Why couldn't all of this have been different? Do we live so well we shouldn't be vitally interested in different possibilities? Which I think is the basic question in utopian fiction, and if not in all SF, at least in that SF which interests me. "Couldn't it have been different?" or as the Gershwin Brothers put it, "It Ain't Necessarily So!"

That kind of voyage seems to me – and I do not pretend that it must be so for everybody – the highest kind of voyage. I am not talking about the jet travel to Japan, I wish I didn't have to fly to Japan. It's horrible actually, and the travel from the airport to the city of Tokyo is unbelievably horrible, the traffic jams and so on, I defend myself by reading SF or crosswords. What is important is being there, if we can call that travelling, that is to say, being elsewhere.

H: You can, why not? I mean I see it as travelling, I think it's the most interesting travelling actually.

S: Well that's the result of travelling, the goal of travelling. But anyway, if you wish to be broadminded and think that this is travel, then I think travelling is what (metaphorically and if we're lucky empirically, experientially) allows us to get outside of, and then look back at, our normal selves, at our norms, the norms of our society, our psychology, even the norms of our philosophy and epistemology which are truly historical. In China it wasn't so for me, because I didn't get far enough. Now, conversely, that was the classical function of China in the Enlightenment. China or the Noble Savage in America intended to show us either what we are or what we are not but could be, that is, a good example, a bad example, or an awful warning.

H: Or what we know and what we don't know. Many things bring you to compare two realities.

S: Yes. Well, of course in literature it's a little bit different, because you compare fictional reality with an empirical reality, and here you compare two original realities.

H: Does one seem to you more fictional than other?

S: It's very tricky, yes. While I am there – say in Japan – it's not less real.

H: It's a different encyclopedia, that's for sure, I mean you don't encounter completely different aliens, like those from Mars, but it's still a different encyclopedia, and you know your own, but do you know theirs really?[4]

S: Some very influential schools of modern criticism would tell you that all realities are constructed, right? And are "realities" the right concept? But what I'm trying to formulate is something different, which is the process of becoming conscious of this. That is to say, all realities may be constructed, but you're socialized into this construction, and you don't see that it is constructed, it's Plato's cave more or less: you're in the cave, you don't know that you're in the cave. Japan shows me the cave! This is the function of Japan for me, partly – and without romanticizing it. I would hate to be an employee of Honda. I prefer my particular vantage point of somebody who doesn't get a salary in Japan, stands outside the system and yet lives inside it. This peculiar liminal position, as an anthropologist would say, has for me the function of liberating one from the cave. Exactly as Plato says, you get out into the daylight and you realize that this was a cave with a torch flickering and the shadows on the wall. Now the problem with Plato is that he thought there was a real reality which was in the Heavens, whereas I have only maybe another, I hope bigger and better, cave. But once you've entered into another cave you have seen that it's a cave. So while we have lost Plato's heavenly location, certainty, we still have the basic liberating insight, which is: you are in a cave, please become aware of it. This is what I like about Plato; the broad daylight of Plato's I don't think I could share, it's his, not mine. But the fact that there's something else that makes you realize that this is not what it looks like, this is not what you have been led to believe, what your spiritual eye has been made to see.

And this is of course the main point of Brecht's work and of his concept of estrangement. I tried then to apply it in my work on SF and utopian fiction. Estrangement, so far as I understand it, is to allow a space, a distance, between the event and the interpretation, in which space the

4 Ms Hager, a Ph.D. student at Tel Aviv University, is here referring to Umberto Eco's notion of a "cultural encyclopedia" which each of us, and every social group, possesses as a, so to speak, operative aspect of our brain(s).

interpretation is no longer automatic but becomes self-reflexive. Why do I do this interpretation? What are my instruments? In other words, I have a microscope through which I'm looking at the world. It is not true that I'm looking with the naked eye, there's no such thing as the naked eye. My eye has been socialized through the school, the family, television, and god knows what. My eye, and more importantly, the brain behind the eye has been socialized.

Now, I also think that this introduces a new factor besides the curiosity with which we began here. Curiosity to my mind is initially positive. It can become silly, you know, like the curiosity of the public in fairs: the woman with a beard and all these monstrosities you gape at, the two-headed calf, etc. So of course curiosity can be abused, like anything, but basically I'm curious in some ways (some friends have pointed out that this can be read in two ways …). Nonetheless, curiosity *per se* is not quite enough. If we now apply my reasoning to my reason "why do I reason this way?" I would say basically because *I live in a world I'm not satisfied with*. If I were satisfied with it, curiosity would be enough. I would go to Greece and swim and look at the Acropolis, but I would not go to Japan in order to see that I'm in a cave. Only if you have some kind of inkling that you already – always already – are in a cave, you can get to the fact that you are in a cave. If you are satisfied, then for you it's not the cave, it's the Elysian Fields or something.

A feeling of dissatisfaction is not necessarily consciously formulated or conceptualized into philosophical and political systems, into a political orientation (although in my case it was, under the impact of fascism, war, and the Yugoslav Revolution). True, the political orientation as it is usually conceptualized, in terms of partisan ideologies and so on, doesn't explain a whole range of experiences. Maybe if we knew how to conceptualize politics more intelligently it would, advancing from Gramsci say, but at present I don't think it does. Yet in this widest sense of politics, if you wish, that is to say a judgment about your living in the macro-community, the civilization you're living in, this highest type of travel that I'm talking about – let us say, epistemological travelling – is a sign of dissatisfaction. It's a symptom. Because if you were satisfied I think you would do what the Daoist sages did, which is to sit in front of the temple and meditate and go nowhere, or, as the medieval rabbis, sit in your study and write

books and meditate. There are two ways to interpret those that stayed home and meditated: either they were satisfied, or they weren't but they had no choice, they couldn't go anywhere – like many European rabbis. But the function of the Chinese sages could be more or less fulfilled by sitting and meditating.

H: By being relaxed in a sense?

S: Right. When we are agitated, we are looking around. We are much too hysterical, obviously. We do too much travelling in my opinion, although perhaps it's necessary for the reasons we have just discussed. But it would be better if these reasons didn't exist. Given that these reasons exist, the travelling is perfectly okay. So I'm not talking against travelling, I'm talking against what makes the travelling necessary. If it's necessary then you must do it. In other words we live in an age of what Hegel called an unhappy consciousness. And yet to have a happy consciousness instead of an unhappy unconsciousness would today be even worse. There is no going back, once the chicken goes out of the egg you can't put it back in. So that's as much as I can make sense out of.

H: I was thinking about the new SF, like *Neuromancer*, and the idea of going into a computer instead of taking a space flight …

S: Virtual reality?

H: Yes. Is this travelling in the sense that you are speaking about?

S: That's a metaphorical travelling but you get inside the metaphor, you are snagged by it. Okay, let us not get into big ontological discussions about cyberspace. To begin with I know little about cyberspace, I know what Gibson & Co. say about it, I have never experienced the three-dimensional, "real," combat-pilot cyberspace – I would like to try it once.

H: You can do this in the streets in London and New York.

S: Well, I think we would have to disentangle several strands, and I will make it as simple as I can. Number one: I don't know enough about it, so I can only speculate from the outside. Number two: this is a space dominated by armies and corporations, it is not a space of the heart's desire. It's a very ambiguous utopia – that's one of the nicest things in Gibson: his utopia is really dubious. Do you really want to shed your body? No doubt

the body can be very cumbersome at times, if you are sick or hungry or weary or cold, but first of all you wouldn't have a mind without a body. If you could take the mind out of the body it would react totally differently. There have been studies about sensory deprivation and so on, not about minds outside the bodies but we may get to it, and there's lots of SF stories about brains in vats and so on. Finally, all our delights are in some way bodily delights; to me thinking is also a bodily delight, the mind is not outside the body. So I find some very strange aspects in the ideology of virtual reality, I find some strange and disquieting aspects. Travelling that downplays the body is partial, truncated travelling.