

Editorial of *Science-Fiction Studies* (1979)

Note 2020: A section on R.D. Mullen's work and the new journal board has been cut here, as well as some minor remarks; I speak of Mullen in my obituary note in Chapter 30. The original was signed by all four editors, but actually written, in the part preserved here, by Marc Angenot and me, thus I leave those two names.

The March 1979 *Science-Fiction Studies* is the first issue of the journal to be published in Montréal, Canada, instead of in Terre Haute, USA, and by a partly new editorial team. Since we have always believed that our enterprise should be, as Rabelais (one of our patron saints) said, self-interpreting – accompanied by its own critical comment – we would like to take a quick look at the road we have been travelling.

1. When *SFS* was begun in 1973, its founders had the ambition to open up SF criticism to a number of new points of view, to broaden its horizons, and to break with the comfortable purring of anecdotal and thematic commentary inherited from the Golden Age (or Tin Age) of SF and its fandom. SF criticism at the time was in the throes of a familiar cooptation tendency: a marginal group, rather critical toward established hierarchies and values, unconsciously veers toward reproducing in its own field the Establishment's ideological assumptions and forms – consensual creation of a standard reduced history, setting up of a canonic corpus and an official pantheon, passwords, disbarments, and excommunications. A wrongly conceived quest for legitimacy and acceptance was beginning to assimilate SF to the “mainstream,” and SF criticism to “high lit” criticism (and to its second-rate critical assumptions and approaches to boot). *SFS* assumed that it was better – even though incomparably more

difficult – to try and locate SF in the complex network of actual cultural and societal history with its dynamics of conflicting forms, motifs, and world views.

The critical opening that *SFS* wanted to effect can be summarized in three ways:

- An opening on the *history* of SF including ancient forms of cognitive estrangement. From the Hellenistic period to the nineteenth century, the imaginary voyage, the Land of Cockayne, the fictional utopia, the alternative satire, and other narratives of rational conjecture are, in our view, both formally contiguous and historically ancestral to present forms of SF, and therefore contribute to illuminate them – by analogy or by contrast.

We were determined not to approach such early SF in the state of mind of a lover of ruins. For us, the century-old history of utopian thought is still vivid; its underground tradition still influences today's literary production and in particular most of the highest achievements in SF. Moreover, we considered extremely provincial and narrow-minded those bogus, shoddy, and forgetful "Histories" of SF where "Antiquity" is represented by Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, "Renaissance" by Hugo Gernsback from *Modern Electrics* to *Amazing Stories*, and "Classicism" by the so-called Golden Age of the 1940s. They only serve to confirm the maxim that those who forget history are condemned to relive it.

- An opening on *other cultures* and literary traditions, in order to question the hidden chauvinism of Anglo-American SF criticism. We have tried to diffuse critical information about contemporary Slavic, Germanic, and Romance SF – till the time when we will be able to deal with Japanese or Chinese texts! This attempt to reach a truly cosmopolitan (or indeed internationalist) perspective has fortunately coincided with the book market's discovery of foreign SF writers: most important, of Italo Calvino, Stanisław Lem, and the Strugatsky brothers, as well as Klein, Merle, Franke, Abe, etc. At the same time, foreign "classics" such as Defontenay, Rosny the Elder, Lasswitz, Witkiewicz, became available in translation – and it was even discovered with amazement that others,

such as Jules Verne, were available in English only in clumsy, inaccurate, and bowdlerized versions.

- An opening on the various methodologies of *contemporary literary theory* – genre morphology, narrative semiotics, Freudian and Marxist criticism. This ambition may have seemed ambiguous. Were we simply trying to give SF, coming out of its ghetto, an institutional, “academic” recognition? To offer it a small jump seat in the Great Hall of Canonic Literature? Fan critics sometimes suspected *SFS* people of being a kind of frogmen of the academic establishment, sent to spy out the shores of SF before their annexation is attempted. On the contrary: in this second half of the twentieth century, the mandarin concept of Literature is sinking and we are not eager to refloat it. To us, it has simply been a matter of “taking SF seriously” – as has been said many times in the pages of the journal. What was meant by this “seriousness”?

Anecdotal (not to say gossipy) and thematic (not to say paraphrastic) SF criticism was for a long time all there was, and it was in our opinion, incapable of a true *critique*. Hence this paradox: SF fans and critics went around saying that SF is the “only alive literature today,” “the literature of the future”; but outdated, irrelevant, and – in fact – discrediting concepts were used to describe it.

Every scholarly journal worthy of the name should display an intelligent tolerance toward opinions and methods, yet at the same time define criteria with precision and rigor. Our pluralism will in the future as in the past mean accepting all approaches to a set of texts, its production and consumption, that put their cards on the table, so to speak – that is, all approaches that acknowledge themselves to be a historically limited heuristic choice and not a transcendental universal essence. On the other hand, it is a general rule in sciences that the object under scrutiny codetermines the methodological tools to be used for scrutinizing it. Therefore, other things being equal, some approaches can be more fertile than others. If SF today is a form of literature fit to refract the growing complexity of historical becoming, then it follows that it will be in most cases best served by a “totalizing” or encompassing critical approach, and that every superficial and ahistorical compartmentalizing – be it hyperformalist, archetypal, anecdotal, impressionistic or “ideological” – will finally prove mystifying and inadequate. Nonetheless, other things are never equal: the proof of

the critical pudding is in the eating, and we will try to be conscious of our inevitable editorial disbeliefs and to suspend them while reading the submissions. All of this constitutes the everyday problem of editorial work; we simply hope, taking one with the other, that *SFS* has had – and might continue to have – reasonable success in balancing these principles.

2. We will not try to measure how far *SFS* has been able to comply with the program sketched above in its first six years. In any case, to background what has been, it seems to us that almost everything still remains to be done. What is most striking in SF criticism is the size and number of problems that have never been dealt with in a critical way. There are, for one example, so many writers both American and European – whose texts deserve an extensive analysis: let us mention only Barjavel, Blish, Boulle, Johanna and Günter Braun, Chan Davis, Disch, Jeury, Klein, Knight, Kuttner and C.L. Moore, Kornbluth, Leiber, Ward Moore, Norton, Oliver, Pohl, Russ, Russell, Sheckley, Shefner, Spinrad, the Strugatskys, Sturgeon, Tenn, van Vogt, Varshavski, Watson, and Weinbaum among those almost totally neglected – and the list could go on.

For another and possibly even more pertinent example, we are growing increasingly skeptical whether the most illuminating mode of SF criticism is to deal with single writers. While being receptive to author-oriented textual analyses too, we are aware that a great variety of economic, sociological, philosophical, and esthetic aspects that cut across the “authorial” compartments remain to be identified and studied thoroughly – we would hope interlocked rather than in isolation.

All of this calls for a reasonable modesty in assessing what has so far been achieved; it also urges us to persevere in opening the journal to an ever-widening compass of opinions and methods, providing that they see SF as a potentially cognitive genre (often hindered from realizing its potentialities by analyzable forces in a complex but man-made history). We do not believe that critics can remain bound by the consciousness of the author at hand, nor that they can fetishize “the text” at the expense of the crucial interface between the text and our common world. In fact, we see the central problem in paraliterary criticism as arising from the confrontation of esthetic and/or political value judgements with the present situation of the book market and the film industry. In the US, both are

exclusively profit-oriented, with their alienating narrative recipes which make for the overwhelming success of ideological constructs of the Three Laws of Robotics, Star Trek or Star Wars type.

Obviously, the situation is somewhat different in the USSR and some other Warsaw Pact countries, but it is after all not fundamentally different. Only the kind of alienation has changed from profit pressures to direct bureaucratic pressures. This still leaves the SF critic of texts from those societies with the necessity of exploring contradictions in some ways different but also comparable to those we have just mentioned – though we concentrated, as we believe we had to, on the situation in capitalism where most of *SFS* contributors and readers live and work.

The SF critic should, no doubt, describe the empirical state of affairs, gathering as much information as he can on the production and consumption of these cultural commodities, describing in the most rigorous way the text's narrative features and their functions; but even the choice of his interests is conditioned by philosophical (and indeed political) value-judgments. Every hyper-bestseller and every billion-dollar movie that invades the market brings a contradiction that can be described as the Star Wars syndrome: endless discussions among "specialists" who sometimes enjoyed the movies while sharing very good critical reasons to hate them. In the social sciences and humanities, there is no place for an external and "objective" observer. "The partial identity of subject and object" (Lucien Goldmann) makes it impossible to eliminate personal equations. It also implies that social contradictions are reflected in the observer's mind. The critic will not be able to describe a literary text in its entirety, with its significant rhetorical, ideological, and social interfaces, without having recourse to a network of methods sufficiently complex and rigorous to at least partly dissolve the blind spot of personal choices and ideological prejudices. To illuminate in such a way a given stylistic or ideological pattern does not necessarily amount to approving or disapproving, rejecting or praising; but on the other hand, any scientific or scholarly point of view contains, explicitly or not, immanent value-judgments.

The above axioms and preoccupations have not changed since *SFS* was created. No doubt we came up against various ideological, ethical, and esthetic resistances. We feel nonetheless that studies in SF are still (we

hope) open-ended, and that the journal has played – and can still play – a creative role in them.

3. In particular, we would like among other things to begin analyzing the present shape of the US book and film market. It is our impression that the bestseller mentality invading the market is a clear example of how the potentialities of this genre are co-opted and sterilized by economic and ideological forces. This has already resulted in vastly overblown novels, poorly organized and without much else to show for itself except for reducing the level of SF to that of the bestseller reader. It has also resulted in a startling change of guard among new SF writers: where we had a number of overambitious writers in the 1960s, whose reach exceeded their grasp, now we have a number of underambitious writers, who do not reach as far as they could grasp (or so we hope). Dale Mullen has indicated that the present dull moment of SF is one of the reasons why he has retired from *SFS* editing; and truly, SF criticism cannot fail to be influenced by current SF. This is a disquieting outlook: and we would like to scan it more closely so as to be prepared ...

However, all of our fine plans and hopes will surely come to naught without your contributions. We would like to collaborate with our readers even more intimately than heretofore: for example, please propose to us special issues – but then propose to us also a plausible co-editor for that issue; or please attack or defend an essay we published – but still better, write a better one and send it to us. Facing the Leviathans, we still have our typewriters.