

CHAPTER 14 (WITH MARC ANGENOT)

## Not Only But Also: Reflections on Cognition and Ideology in SF and SF Criticism (1979)

Each of us is all the sums he has not counted ...

Th. Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel*

We must be systematic, but we should keep our systems open.

A.N. Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*

Thus art is a peculiar and fundamental human capacity: not a disguise for morality or a prettification of knowledge but an independent discipline that represents the various other disciplines [such as ethics or cognition] in a contradictory manner.

B. Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*

No, don't attack us, gentlemen, we're our own opponents anyway and we can hit ourselves better than you can.

R. Hausmann, "The German Philistine is Angry"

The present moment of SF, SF criticism, and of our own views on both prompts us to try going back to basics – to reflect on where we are now and what ways may be open or closed to us. Since we do not believe in the independence of subject from object, of heuristic method from social practice, we shall often have to shuttle back and forth between

SF and SF criticism in our argumentation. These are not quite systematic reflections, and we hope they will be understood as provisional. As Brecht, one of our own models, used to say, “progressing is more important than being progressive.”<sup>1</sup>

- 1 Our title as well as some basic links in our argument derive from Brecht; see in English *The Messingkauf Dialogues* (1965), *Brecht On Theatre*, ed. John Willett (1966), but also the Vintage *Collected Plays* edition in progress (New York, 1971ff.) which includes much highly pertinent commentary of his – as well as the plays themselves and Poems I–III (1976). Other as basic links derive from Ernst Bloch, whose encyclopedic opus is even less accessible in English, but see his *Karl Marx* (1971), *Man On His Own* (1970), *A Philosophy of the Future* (1970), and his essays in the following titles: W. H. Capps ed., *The Future of Hope* (1970), E. Fromm ed., *Socialist Humanism* (1966), E. Munk ed., *Brecht* (1972), M. Solomon ed., *Marxism and Art* (1974), and G. Steiner and R. Fagles eds., *Homer* (1962). From numerous other methodological debts, those to Jurij Lotman’s *The Structure of the Artistic Text* (1977), Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Search for a Method* (1968), Luis J. Prieto’s *Pertinence et pratique* (1975), and Nikos Poulantzas’s *Political Power and Social Classes* (1973) could be most directly felt in what sometimes amount to paraphrases of their positions. The best introductions to this whole complex of problems can be found in Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (1971) and Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (1977); see also their and Solomon’s bibliographies. The D.H. Lawrence quote is taken from L.C. Knights, *Explorations* 3 (1976), p. 113, and the Macaulay one from his *Critical, Historical and Miscellaneous Essays and Poems* (1887), 2: 229; the use of Wells by the US press is illuminatingly documented in David Y. Hughes, “The War of the Worlds in the Yellow Press,” *Journalism Quarterly* (Winter 1966). Our discussion carries on the arguments in our earlier works, for example, Marc Angenot, *Le Roman populaire* (1975) and Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979), as well as the argument of our Editorial in *SFS* No. 17. The original publication lists our gratitude for comments on an embryonic form of this essay by a number of colleagues.

## 1. Ideological and Cognitive Criticism

### I.I.

What might be the basic criterion by which criticism worthy of its humanistic calling should finally judge SF (as all other art)? Our first proposition is that all literature occupies a continuum whose poles are *illuminating human relationships*, thus making an intervention with a view to a more manageable and pleasurable life in common, and *obscuring or occulting them*, thus making for a more difficult life. SF situates itself within this general alternative of liberation vs. bondage, self-management vs. class alienation, by organizing its narrations around the exploration of possible new relationships, where the novelty is historically determined and critically evaluatable. Thus, the understanding of SF – constituted by history and evaluated in history – is doubly impossible without a sense of history and its possibilities, a sense that this genre is a system which changes in the process of social history.

All this means that *criticism (and in particular SF criticism) is centrally dealing with the interaction between text and context, the unique literary work and our common social world*. In other words, an adequate critical approach will *at the end* of its exploration relate literary production to social meanings, since it will not find it possible to divorce literary from sociopolitical judgments. The SF critic should, no doubt, begin by knowing the “first principles” of his trade or craft – internal coherence, clarity, resolving power, distinction of levels of relevance, economy of proceedings, informativeness, etc. A first step in literary analysis is to identify the actual development of significant features in the narration (though even this beginning is only possible because there are some basic or “zero” assumptions about people and the world with which we approach literary analysis itself). But all this is merely basic critical “literacy”: after the ABC, other steps follow in a critical

reading. This indispensable first step will remain useless if it is not integrated with identifying those narrative bonds that can be defined as the relation between the set of elements in the text and the larger set of elements from which the textual ones have been selected (e.g., the relation of a blue sun to all other stars). In other words, the world that is excluded from the text cannot fail to be tacitly reinscribed into it by the ideal reader cognizant of that world: he will notice that the sun is not simply blue but blue-and-not-yellow. (It is of course possible and not infrequent for readers to have a distorted perception of our common world, through ignorance, misinformation, mystification, or class interest: for them, literature will not be properly “readable” until their interests change. Nonetheless, a text contributes to the education of its readers more than is usually assumed.)

Such a “not only but also” procedure, though not taught when most of us were students, should be a central tool of every literary critic, and quite obviously of every SF critic. Against all “positive” common sense, *a text is constituted and marked as much by what it excludes as by what it includes* – and it excludes much more than it includes. Therefore the critic cannot simply judge “what the author says” – a fetishized “text as thing” – without smuggling even into a first description some presuppositions he/she should therefore openly acknowledge. When we read a text, we should understand *not only* its internal narrative articulation *but also* its relation to wider paradigms. The result is that the text inescapably amounts to a given interpretation or model of the extra-textual universe. To put it in spatial terms, any literary text exists on two levels of similarity: it is in some ways “like” that set of elements which it actually presents (effects of a blue sun) but it is in other ways also “like” the whole of the universe from which that set of elements is taken, a universe in which there are blue and non-blue suns, with certain possibilities of planets and life on them, distances to each other, etc. To put it in temporal terms; any literary text contains its historical epoch as a hierarchy of significations *within* the text, just as the epoch contains the text both as product and factor.

I.2.

Our second proposition is that the SF critic can in his approach mimic mature art, which is many-sided and cognitive, or primitive art, which is one-sided and hence ideological.

Like any other artistic modelling, literature can fuse the strengths of a game model and a scientific model. A game model (a card-game, say) can only refer to vague, quite abstract relationships, without any precise reference, direct or indirect, to reality outside the game: the game model is semantically empty. A scientific model, on the contrary, has a precise referent in reality, it is semantically full, but it is at the same time one-sided (univalent): only one semantic system is true in any scientific model, all others are false. Now an artistic model if properly used – if its potentialities are fully realized – can be both *semantically full and many-sided*. Full, since it always refers to an extra-literary reality (Stapledon's *Sirius*, say, refers to possible new relations among people, perhaps centered on an intellectual like the author?); many-sided (plurivalent), since several semantic systems, played off against each other, coexist in mature artistic cognition (not only *Sirius*'s but also *Plaxy*'s, her father's, the narrator's, all interacting within a continuum between the poles of the animal and the spiritual). All literature that attempts to be either an empty game or a "science" is ideological in direct proportion to such confusion. In the latter case it confuses fact with fiction and analogy with prediction. A limit-case of quite some interest as an awful warning is constituted by all the Velikovskys, Hubbards, von Dänikens, and ufologists who erect standard SF topics – which are within fiction neutral or indeed meaningful – into "true" revelations, thereby instantly converting them into virulent ideologies of political obscurantism.

The term "ideology" can in such a context be used in two mutually exclusive ways. It can mean any system of ideas, any structure of sociopolitical sensibility; or it can mean those systems of ideas and structures of sociopolitical sensibility that obscure the real foundations of human relationships and thus impede easier living. In the first, wider sense, all art and literature inescapably participates of ideology and "is ideological." In the second, narrower sense, only systems of meaning and sensibility which make people's economic and psychological existence in common more

difficult and less pleasurable are to be considered ideological. Both meanings of “ideological” have impressive authorities to recommend them, inside as well as outside of Marxism, but only the second, narrower, meaning will be used in this chapter. The argument for this choice would be longer than the rest of the chapter, so that we can only hope it will be justified by its fruits.

However, there are not only important parallels but also important differences between “ideological SF” and “ideological SF criticism.” A work of fiction written within the same ideological horizon as a work of literary criticism has some inbuilt saving graces in proportion to the esthetic or formal qualities which it may possess, for they will endow it with the contradictoriness inherent in all meaningful artistic endeavors. In the perhaps slightly emphatic terms of D.H. Lawrence’s “Study of Thomas Hardy”: “Every work of art adheres to some system of morality. But if it be really a work of art, it must contain the essential criticism of the morality to which it adheres ... The degree to which the system or morality, or the metaphysic of any work of art is submitted to criticism within the work of art makes the lasting value and satisfaction of that work.”

Therefore, though fictional systems can contribute to systematically notional cognition – as witness Marx’s or Freud’s use of Shakespeare or Sophocles – yet critical cognition cannot simply transpose elements or aspects of the fictional insights into its own discourse. When Dick satirically dramatizes a world of ubiquitous simulacra in *Ubik*, he is identifying some new experiences of the “little man” in mass-consumption capitalism. But when some French critics (and lately, alas, Dick himself) use some novels of his as a proof that life in capitalism abolishes all difference between the real and the imaginary, then they are making a systematic theory out dramatized presentation: they are engaging in ideology, and thus betraying the very function of critical thinking.

### 1.3.

We believe all criticism to be ideological and mystifying which tacitly and surreptitiously transforms its particular, operatively necessary approach or point of view into a universal, eternal axiom. True, all knowledge is

inescapably codetermined by its subject's point of view as well as by its object. The mystification comes about when this historically located construct and heuristic choice, which is basically an "as if" ("if we agree for the duration of this critique to look at that text under this point of view, then so-and-so necessarily follows"), grows, like a djinn from the bottle, into a transcendental entity and metaphysical essence. Such mystifying criticism installs a blind spot, a *conceptual fetish* degrading it into ideology instead of cognition, at the center of its vision. This fetish has its variants; it can be signified by the terms Myth, Author's Intention, Theme, Ethics, Scientific Extrapolation, Economic Determination, or the Unconscious (Freudian or post-Freudian). In all cases, however, the fetishizing operation eliminates the interaction between the text and the history in which it was written and is being read, so that the contradictions and mediations of a history-as-process are passed over in silence. This fetishized criticism is, when all is said and done, in a position not too different from that of the often-invoked SF ghetto, which is why it feels so comfortable within it, as a subsidiary epicycle – the ghetto of SF criticism.

The commonsensical – supposedly "empirical" or "positive" – approach is just a shamefaced variant of such fetishism. Its slogan "let us look at things as they are and never mind the theories" is a mystification by omission, as the variants mentioned above are by commission. It assumes it has got hold of an Adamic language which can proceed straight to the non-contradictory essence of a text or social experience. This constitutive assumption is simply wrong, another bit of theologizing ideology disguised as bluff realism. It conceals a tacit denial of anything beyond the surface appearances, of any depths beneath or alternatives to the holy Experiences-That-Be and Powers-That-Be. No doubt, when anyone is truly the first to survey and name a sociocultural phenomenon – such as the opus of an SF writer, the run of a magazine, or the SF production of a brief period, she/he is in fact in the Adamic position of first namer. In that case it is often, for the nonce, tolerable to establish more or less commonsensical categories, describe the subject at hand with their help, and await further discussion. But empiricism and positivism erected into a permanent principle, as so often happens in studies of "popular culture," lead to the suspicion that a great deal of libido has been diverted into a perverse enjoyment of impotence.

A truly critical attitude will necessarily take into account both the text and its gaps, the choices made by the author and the set chosen from; and for this it will need categories more useful than those of common sense.

#### *I.4.*

But then, what is a truly critical attitude? One that would eschew as many ideological traps as is humanly possible in this inhuman, antagonistic world of ours? We have no dogmatic recipe to offer. But we would like to try and define a horizon within which the no doubt numerous variants of such an attitude become possible: one of a modern, epistemologically self-conscious and self-critical science or better cognition. This is the only horizon that incorporates the viewer (experimenter, critic) into the structure of what is being beheld (experiment, text). It is therefore the only horizon which permits the provisional method situated within it to be integrated into social practice and to become self-corrective on the basis of social practice, and which has a chance – if used intelligently – to show realistically the relationships of people in the material world. The apparent paradox of cognitive or non-ideological criticism is that it does not try to eliminate the historical (historically limited but not arbitrary) choice on which it is based. Rather, it explicitly recognizes this choice as the basis of its whole enterprise. It is thus enabled to eliminate the bias introduced by its own presuppositions. It should be clear that such a scientific horizon is quite different from and indeed incompatible with that of the “objective” nineteenth-century scientism. On the contrary, such realistic and materialistic cognition implies that people’s consciousness, arising out of and feeding back into a complex network of social practice, is the indispensable mediation and component of that practice.

Ideology claims today to be “scientific,” just as in the Middle Ages it claimed to be religious (or indeed to be the science of religion, theology). But scientific is exactly what ideological propositions are not: at this point, ideology becomes analytically vulnerable. What science is in historico-cultural disciplines, such as literary and cultural criticism, is a subject much too vast for these reflections. But perhaps one could set up two



provisional first criteria which criticism would have to satisfy in order to begin being scientific:

- (a) A scientific approach begins with the distinction between (though also continues with the interaction of) processes in existential economic reality and processes of thought; it begins with the *distinction between being and cognition* and continues with the *intervention of cognition into being*.
- (b) For a scientific approach *our social existence is both source and goal of human thoughts and emotions, of art and science*. This does not mean that art is a “superstructure” erected on a material “basis.” On the contrary, literature and other arts are – in their own, autonomous though not independent, way – material products of human creative potentialities, and one of the best means for clarifying human relationships and values. Literature, film, and so on, can provide sets of manageable and explorable *models of social existence*.

## 2. Characteristics of Ideology in Criticism and Fiction

### 2.0.

Thus a critical approach can be either cognitive or ideological – to take theoretically pure extremes again. Ideally, of course, criticism (which we here do not distinguish from scholarship) is conducted by elaborating a logical conceptual system, and it should therefore always be a cognitive pursuit. Ideology, though it constructs pseudo-systems, is strictly speaking not a conceptual system but a transposition of incompatible propositions into a mythical pretense at a logical system. Ideological criticism is therefore always half-baked: it may be useful in some ways but

it does not go far enough. If its system seems to work while confined to paraphrasing a fictional text (in which, as we argue, incompatibles can coexist when organized in esthetically convincing even if conceptually unclarified and indeed contradictory ways), it will become clearly untenable as soon as the critique is exposed to everyday existential criteria. The critic's task is, thus, not merely to clarify the textual propositions but also to ask whether – beyond the author's craftsmanship – such propositions can be translated into a tenable conceptual system. To take the text at face value, to erect the necessary preliminary homework of understanding what Asimov or Zelazny is saying, into an uncritical conclusion (usually a tacit one, by omission) that whatever he may be saying should also be the reader's cognitive horizon – this is the mark of an ideological critic. And yes: SF criticism today is chock-full of ideological critics ...

Here we cannot but indicate at least briefly that such an overriding ideology is not only a matter of theoretical consciousness operating in a pure realm of ideas, but also a material force and power based on given interests. Positivist scholarship in literature has its own long history and function in the educational system. It first made possible the academic system under which we are living today, the system of "publish or perish" (or should one call it "scholars for dollars"?) which supposedly yields quantifiable results. A great number of academic careers have been and are being built within such an ideology, which has fairly substantial prizes and penalties to offer at this time of threatening economic and psychological insecurity: jobs, promotions, publication opportunities, research funds, and so forth. We cannot analyze here this complex and mostly hidden network by which an ideology becomes material power, but we should at least state that such a network largely explains the hold of this ideology even in such a relatively new and fresh field as SF criticism.

## 2.1.

If we want to avoid such one-dimensionality and fetishism, and do justice to the richness of possible human relationships in history, then we have

to begin compiling a brief inventory of current ideological fetishes that dominate, first, SF texts, and second, SF criticism.

The first such ideological pseudo-system has been given a handy name by Marcuse: it is a sub-species of the general ideology of *repressive tolerance* (a fake tolerance, of course).

A first mark by which such ideological criticism can be caught *in flagranti*, is precisely its reduction of the self-contradictory esthetic unity into a consensual system – it is its *hatred of contradiction*. For example, it is ideological to say Heinlein is a Calvinist, unless one in the next breath adds that Heinlein is also a Calvinist without Calvinism. Heinlein's opus is (to a degree still to be determined) built around the contradiction of a class of Democratic Elect, who exist without a complete value-system that would logically validate their Electedness. For, instead of believing that only an elite will find grace in God's eyes, a pseudo-Jeffersonian democrat must believe that all men can learn how to handle technology (usually in Heinlein some form of military technology, from arms and rockets to psychological warfare). The resulting pragmatist ideology of the Elect who are recognized by their performance is logically or scientifically untenable within Heinlein's sincerely democratic framework, and leads him to construct strange "two-tier" democracies in Orwellian states where some are more equal than others. These incompatibilities make possible interesting tales of how to recognize such an Electedness, as well as boring tales about the exploits of the Elect (like the aptly named Lazarus Long). The reasons for such simultaneously rich and logically untenable contradictions are to be sought in Heinlein's personal variant of the historical antinomies underlying the social existence in the USA from the 1930s on, more than in any "history-of-ideas" preoccupation of this or that author with Calvinism, Jeffersonian ideas, or anything of the sort. If such historical antinomies are not merely taken up but – necessarily – strongly reinterpreted by the writer, as here by Heinlein, then the readers (including the critics) cannot but be faced with the choice of whether or not to accept the text's version and interpretation of a common social reality and its conflicts.

This means that the critic cannot simply be the writer's advocate. No doubt, he/she has to be able also to function on the writer's wavelength in order to understand and explain what the text is conveying. But the critic

should, we believe, overridingly be *the advocate of an ideal non-alienated and libertarian reader who has the right to receive all the evidence of how, why, and in whose interests the writer has interpreted our common universe* – of where is the text situated within the inescapable polarity of illuminating or occulting human relationships. To put it in different terms, the critic cannot choose not to be the advocate of some values: all presentations of human relationships (however disguised these might be in SF) are heavily value-fraught. Indeed the values transmitted, denied or yearned for are the main significance of such presentations. The critic can only choose which values to advocate, and how to go about it – to begin with, covertly or overtly. Thus, a critic trying to construct a conceptual system by refusing to see the paradox which is at the core of Heinlein's narration is wrong even when a clever arguer because she/he has succumbed to an unexamined ideology: it is precisely the author's rich self-contradictions which should be explored. Equally, the significant SF writers in our time – say Delany, Dick, Le Guin, Lem, Piercy, Spinrad, the Strugatskys, Tiptree ... – all deal in quite painful contradictions, often within their protagonist(s). To remain bound by the author's consciousness means for the critic to abdicate his/her cognitive task in favor of ideology.

## 2.2.

A second mark by which ideology in SF and SF criticism can be known is crass *individualism*. This category reflects and reinforces the separation of public and private, characteristic of bourgeois life. All of SF's conflicts between "man" (our hero – necessarily a superhero and therefore not man but superman!) and "society" (a totally anachronistic feudal dictatorship as in *Dune*, or in the best case a faceless "them" – if not "us" – as in the later Delany) develop within the unstated and therefore textually unshakable ideology which denies the existence of meaningful groupings between *the* individual and *the* society. In other words, there are no social classes with collective and diverging economic interests, and therefore there are no unsurmountable class conflicts. In wish-dream SF (e.g., space operas) the individual will win out, in more mature cases he will be defeated. (He,

not she: for a long time, the mere presence of a heroine – necessarily the representative of an oppressed group – was subversive, since it involved at least a perverted image of class conflict in the gender/sex conflict; but we have now begun getting heroines – say in Janet T. Morris – as mystifying as the heroes.) In both cases, however, in all individualistic SF, the game is played according to the just described ground-rule of *the individual* (me) excluding *the society* (us) and vice versa, and of everybody being no more and no less than an individual. The trouble with this ground-rule is that it is reductionist and false, taken over wholesale from the dominant bourgeois ideology. Since any upper class in a “democratic” state has to claim that it is simply composed of the “natural” leaders, that it is not a special-interest class, its ideology will stress the struggle of the fittest individuals as “natural” (say, validated by natural sciences, no less). Just as the bourgeois upper class remains in power by claiming that there are no social classes, so its ideology remains dominant by claiming that there are no ideologies (and especially no existentially and logically irreconcilable ideologies): that there are only individual opinions, which have to be tolerated, as well as “natural,” just “human,” attitudes – the behavioral equivalent of the existing consensus in politics within which every isolated individual can safely have her/his own “opinion.” Such a ground-rule is then particularized in SF as “natural” reactions for or against technology, for inner vs. outer space, and so forth.

Yet the originality of SF as a genre is that its characters are used in attempts at systematic analyses of a collective destiny involving a whole community – a people, a race, a world, etc. Therefore the final horizon of individualistic psychological and/or ethical criticism is simply inadequate and (if used as the dominant critical approach and not as an initial tool) ideological.

### 2.3.

A further and closely related mark of occulting ideology, we believe, is that it *displaces and isolates* (or fragments) the semantic space of cognition, that it deforms and distorts the very field to be understood, isolating

it from other social spaces and categories of cognition and practice. Most strictly this is the case of such key cognitive spaces as political economy (who works at what for whom for how much and in whose interest), conspicuous by its absence even in the seemingly most progressive SF such as that of Le Guin (except for a first approach to it in *The Dispossessed*, the crowning novel of the US “leftist” trend). If anybody ever works at anything among the significant characters in SF except at war, crime, and adventures, it is at travelling, cerebrating, or at saving the galaxy. Live? – our servants will do it for us, said the French aristocrats. Produce? – our robots will do it for us, imply the strictly consuming or at best redistributing SF protagonists. One never has any inkling who builds all those spaceships, who feeds and clothes our hero and heroine. They certainly don’t do it themselves. As for the fetish of Technology, we can fortunately refer the reader to the incisive analysis by Joanna Russ (in *SFS* no. 16) of how in SF – and elsewhere – this is divorced from economics.

#### 2.4.

Thus, we see SF as a genre in an unstable equilibrium or compromise between two factors. The first is its cognitive – philosophical and incidentally political – potentiality as a genre that grows out of the subversive, lower-class form of “inverted world.” The second is a powerful upper and middle-class ideology that has, in the great majority of texts, sterilized such potential horizons by contaminating them with mystifications about the eternally “human” and “individual,” which preclude significant presentations of truly *other* relationships. If the above holds for literature in general, it is particularly blatant in the case of SF, which as a genre deals centrally not only with collective destiny but also – and more particularly – with power relationships. Power might be defined, as in Nikos Poulantzas, as the ability of a given class to put into effect its specific interest by endowing it with the social force of a general constraint. The power struggles in SF, however, are usually displaced in one of two ways. First, from society into biology (Social Darwinism, up to racist and sexist chauvinism) or even cosmology (natural catastrophes, from

Jefferies and Wells to Ballard and the Strugatskys, to mention only the best). Second: when the power struggles do remain a human affair, they are displaced into uncouth mixtures of politics and individualistic psychology, often parapsychology (from van Vogt and Asimov to Herbert, and even some Dick or Le Guin); or they are displaced into cyclical theories of history where the future is just a weird repetition of the past, or into its obverse ideology of pseudo-scientific and technological extrapolation, where the future is just a weird repetition of the present in a state of grossly inflamed and irritated distension (as Wells self-critically said of his prototypical *When the Sleeper Wakes*).

We wish to note that, while in principle all such displacements could serve as vehicles of a parable on existential economic power relationships, and have sometimes done so (in the best Dick or Simak and in most of Wells or Le Guin, say), usually they do not. Instead of being a vehicle, the displacements are presented as literal, “thought-experiment” propositions, so to speak. From Mary Shelley and Wells on, the bane of SF has been such confusion of ends and means. It issues either in sensationalism – the superficially acute but meaningless conflicts of galactic empires or strange menaces from inner space – or in Fantasy – the supposedly suggestive but unverifiable and non-cognitive wonders used for purposes of psychic purgation and titillation.

Leaving aside in this chapter the genre of Fantasy – that dark twin of SF in which the sense of “it ain’t necessarily so” breaks away from the sense of what is even potentially a material possibility, and with which SF criticism should urgently come to grips – we should like to pursue a little further the illuminating instance of *sensationalism*. It is not defined simply by the presence of an adventure-laden plot, in itself a possible analog of the science-fictional adventure of cognition and therefore often great fun, but by the anxious, eunuch-like way such a plot avoids exploring the otherness of the novum which made those adventures possible: the new locus, people, scientific element, society, etc. Potentially (as any SF reader knows), a dynamic plot subverts the initial situation; actually (as too many SF critics do not see), this potential remains unfulfilled in sensationalist SF, whose surface dynamics present no meaningful Other at all (e.g., the *Star Wars*’ white-clad goodies vs. black-clad baddies). A classical case, trend-setting

for SF, was the turn-of-the-century reduction of Wells's *War of the Worlds* to sensationalism in the US yellow press by the simple expedient of leaving in all the "action" (Martian death-rays, crowd fights) and deleting all the discussions in which Wells's narrator tries to make sense of the action, to reflect on its causes, effects, and possible meanings. Such a "cut the guff" he-man reductionism amounts, of course, to a terroristic suppression of cognition, now happily internalized in much SF as a one-dimensional tradition and market constraint (the market having been shaped by such censorship in the first place). Curiosity, the interest in causes and effects, is thus degraded to suspense, the interest in effects sundered from causes. Criticism that would simply "explicate the text" would in all such cases clearly be a victim of a massive censorship disguised as "entertainment," "we are all competing for the idiot multitude's beer money," "the great Gernsback tradition" (or, complementarily, "the great New Wave tradition," where sensationalism turns introvert), and so on, *ad nauseam*.

It becomes clear that to give anything like a full account of SF, textual analysis has to be integrated with a highly critical account of all traditional and contemporary mediations which made for just such texts among all the possible ones to be written: the great role of some mediators such as Campbell is well-known but scarcely fully explored. But a history in which populist-cum-radical SF once upon a time sold at least as well as sterilized SF – the comparison of Mark Twain, Bellamy, Donnelly, and Jack London with Frank Stockton, J.J. Astor, the anti-utopians such as David Parry or *Ralph 124C 41+* is immediately illuminating – makes it obvious that something changed radically in the North American "reception esthetics" around 1910, roughly with the advent of E.R. Burroughs. That not yet properly investigated "something" amounts to an absorption of bourgeois ideology into SF. A group of ideological motifs now appears – sensational adventures dominated by physical conflict, technology as a force of good or evil divorced from who uses it for what interests, history as a catastrophic and meaningless cycle of barbaric rise and decadent fall, etc. – which was soon to give rise to the characteristic SF sub-forms defining the genre until the present day.



### 3. Retrospect and Prospect

#### 3.1.

Of course, all these tentative reflections do not amount to a rounded-off history or theory of English-language SF, let alone modern SF in general. Important changes in SF came about in the 1960s which at least partly broke with the internalized consensus sketched above (which itself had bright exceptions; many of them – Simak, Pohl, Tenn, Sheckley, some Heinlein, etc. – were noted but insufficiently explained in Amis's *New Maps of Hell*). One indicator of the change is the phoenix rebirth of concern with and for utopias, for the collective sociopolitical organization of human happiness. The repressive tolerance in "rational, commonsense" politics and ideology had distorted this term into a landlord's sneer – Macaulay's "an acre in Middlesex is better than a principality in Utopia." More insidiously, conservative ideology and abstract escapism had infiltrated the texts themselves, turning too many (though never all) fictional utopias into static and untenable constructs. In fact, many of these stunted utopias presented quasi-religious and terrorist pseudo-paradises just as isolated from dynamic social practice as the catastrophic SF narrations – the "new maps of hell" dystopias – whose obverse and ideological complement they by that token became.

Moreover, all of this happened in an age when increased productivity led to both sociopolitical practice and powerful cognitive systems – such as Darwin's, Marx's, or Einstein's – that were incompatible with an eternal stability. No doubt too, the only very partial (displaced, isolated, and ideologized) success of radical hopes from, say, the Mexican and Bolshevik revolutions to the present day amounts to an overall temporary failure and deferral of utopian hopes. In spite of all this, the basic lesson of all such heroic attempts, including the tragic failures, has to our mind confirmed the unquenchability of utopian Hope-the-Principle (Bloch) as the horizon correlative to human strivings and in fact defining *Homo sapiens* as more

than simply an animal, as a cultural or indeed a cosmic entity. Thus, a deeper lawfulness seems to be indicated by the fact that whenever SF began shaking off the repressive hierarchical and ideological consensus, and in direct proportion to the depth of the shaking, SF was able to envisage the pros and cons of a dynamic, provisional – in old, static terms “ambiguous” – utopia again. This held for the period from Bellamy to London, and it holds for the period from Yefremov, the Strugatskys, and Dick to Russ, Piercy, Le Guin, Delany, Callenbach, and Nichols. In between those two periods, in the heyday of E.R. Burroughs and Asimov, utopia was philosophically neither more nor less possible or necessary, it was simply ideologically occulted and displaced, privatized, and fragmented (e.g., into psychohistory or Laws of Robotics). In these last half a dozen years, the utopianizing thrust of ca. 1961–73 has mostly run dry in response to sociopolitical backlash and disappointment. This is why we find a wave of demoralization, of commingling anti-cognitive Fantasy with SF, of irrationality or banality, surging back into even the more significant SF texts.

### 3.2.

All the more reason for SF criticism to begin considering *not only* the major achievements of the genre *but also* the reasons for the unease prevalent in SF today, which paradoxically (or lawfully?) corresponds to its marketing successes. In order to do so, SF criticism has to become able to look at its own blind spots as a prerequisite to illuminating the cognition and ideology in SF. Just as the human eye inverts external pictures in its working process, so products of intellectual work fashion their models not only by selecting from the raw materials of “external” inputs but also by inverting the relationships of social existence and presenting their concepts as entirely thought-derived: in the actual artistic (or scientific) presentation, the most abstruse or fantastic concept is as real as any other concept. It is thus not absolutely necessary that SF call things by their scientific names, but it certainly is that it call things by their humanly cognitive – moral and political – names. SF criticism must be able to do justice to such specific characteristics of SF, and to avoid confusing the

genre's utopian-cum-scientific pathos and cognitive horizon with a pragmatic demand for accurate scientific extrapolation, either technological or sociopolitical. In brief: SF criticism ought to be not only firm, but also flexible; not only systematic but also open.