

Circumstances and Stances: A Retrospect

PREFACE 2015 TO "CIRCUMSTANCES AND STANCES"

This article resulted from an invitation of the PMLA editors to discuss the "particular cultural and political circumstances in which I write" for their special issue no. 3 (2004) on SF, with a contribution of limited size. I therefore chose to contribute a personal retrospective of how those circumstances determined what I wrote. Its first part is devoted to epistemology or, more simply, knowledge (cognition, understanding) - a truly Williamsian "keyword" in all my endeavours, as it ought to be for all intellectuals: since we are either bearers of humanised knowledge or killing drones for capitalist warfare. The presuppositions of knowledge, that is, a formal detour through epistemology, seemed to me indispensable and imperative. A conclusion was that epistemology intertwines with politics (theory and practice) as a double helix. From this flowed, with much help from Brecht, Marx, and utopian/dystopian fiction (from London though Zamyatin to Le Guin, Dick, Mitchison, Piercy, and K.S. Robinson)¹, my investigations into the role of us intellectuals of the Nineties and early Oughts referred to in this article. As one of the favourite poets of my student days, Jules Laforgue, presciently wrote in his "Complaint of the Wise Man from Paris":

*Mais comme Brénnus avec son épée, et d'avance,
Suis-je pas dans un des plateaux de la balance?
[But like Brennus with his sword, right from the start,
Am I not in one of the trays of the balance?]*

The second part then improvised an overarching logic to 10 writings of mine about utopian and science fiction in the five years preceding this intervention. I think the logic is defensible, though with a larger sample a neater one might perhaps be found.

Immodestly -- and thus in tune with the article this is prefacing -- I am rather pleased with what I managed within 2,000 words.

Note

1/ The essays I was writing at the time, in which this can be followed, are now mainly collected in my three books below.

Works Cited

Defined by a Hollow: Essays on Utopia, Science Fiction, and Political Epistemology. Oxford: P. Lang, 2010.

Darko Suvin: A Life in Letters. Ed. Ph.E. Wegner. Vashon Island WA 98070: Paradoxa, 2011. In Leviathan's Belly: Essays for a Counter-Revolutionary Time. Baltimore MD: Wildside P for Borgo P, 2012.

CIRCUMSTANCES AND STANCES (2004)

You asked me about the “particular cultural and political circumstances in which I write.” They have changed decisively several times in my life. I have been several times an expatriate and finally an émigré from Yugoslavia, and am now an expatriate from Canada: my life has made me very attuned to global material and moral changes. I shall focus on the changes that I personally, being laggard, felt as including deeply on my professional work only in the last ten years or so, the watershed for me being the illegal and immoral bombing of Serbia led by the United States. By then I had published three books on science fiction: *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979), *Victorian Science Fiction in the U.K.* (1983), and *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction* (1988) – and written enough further essays for a fourth book that was scrapped when the Liverpool University Press had its budget cut. The changes make me, alas, the bearer of bad news, for as I see it our rulers have in practice destroyed the wall that our disciplines wrongly thought existed between culture and political economics, and we had better draw the consequences. And yet the gesture and bearing of writing this report² also imply a hope that (with much clarity, work, and luck) we intellectuals – writers and then critics – can make an important difference.

2 See Suvin, “*Haltung* (Bearing) and Emotions: Brecht’s Refunctioning of Conservative Metaphors for Agency,” in Thomas Jung, ed., *Zweifel – Fragen – Vorschläge* (Frankfurt a. M., 1999).

1. In this world of late aggressive capitalism without a human face, what we are allowed or denied to teach by its politicians and managers, what monies we are given or refused for research, intervenes into our daily lives in unprecedented, capillary ways. A primary factor shaping our situation is the bending of all technological and other cultural innovations to the purposes of capitalism as a totalizing system. Two-thirds of the Gross National Product in the societies of the capitalist North today derive from the mental labor of the new middle classes, whose core is constituted by intellectuals. Richard Ohmann’s classical book about the role of English in America notes, “Knowledge (technical, scientific, managerial) is accountable, not only for the material triumphs of [the capitalist] system, but for the all-encompassing control it has over the way we live.”³ Through copyright and patent legislation, often through piratical plunder of non-patented knowledge, mental labor is being more and more subsumed under exploitable property. We live in a “knowledge society”: alas, one in which useful knowledge and perniciously fake knowledge are closely intertwined. Knowledge as use-value for living is being evicted by knowledge as exchange-value for profits, with its logical end in “smart bombs” for mass killings.

What, then, is knowledge? And what is the function of us intellectuals as bearers of knowledge? As to the first question: the economic collapse of Fordism and the political collapse of Leninism plus Keynesianism have shaken our epistemology: how come we thought we knew what we knew, when a good part of what we thought we knew beyond a peradventure in (say) 1945–74 has turned out to be inaccurate? Some certainties have become thoroughly uncertain, and I do not see how we can now gauge the correctness of any replacing hypothesis without establishing first a great deal about how do we know what we believe we know, about what is the *bon usage* of knowing and in knowing. There is no way around focusing on some knots within epistemology. I adopt the definition of epistemology as the theory of knowledge, dealing with the possibilities and limits of human knowledge, with the analysis of conceptual and other (e.g., affective)

3 Richard Ohmann, *English in America* (Middletown, CT, 1976; reprinted with new retrospective "Introduction" Middletown, CT, 1996), p. 273.

cognitive systems, and in particular with the critique of language and other sign systems as concrete consciousness.

For a starter: any epistemic tool of ours defines equally its object- types and its subject-wielders *as* something and *to (for)* something; its embodied adoption co-defines our access to the world of signifying and significant potential actions. Any understanding intervenes into life to a certain degree – if only by refusing to intervene. In brief, it is imperative that we realize, as the feminists have, that epistemology does not function without our asking the political question "What for?" or *cui bono*. Interests and values decisively *shape* all perception: it was Marx's great insight that no theory or method can be understood without the practice of social groups to which it corresponds. Thus our answers can be found only in feedback with potential action. As Vico argued, whatever we cannot intervene into, we cannot understand: it follows that *the epistemological and the political intertwine*. Those who do not put an explicitly defensible civic cognition at the heart of their professional cognition at best adopt the dominant epistemology of the time when they were students, and at worst adapt their cognition to the new epistemology of the Powers-That-Be.

I cannot here articulate properly an answer to the second question: our deeply contradictory situation as intellectuals, impacted like a split tooth. I have discussed this elsewhere,⁴ concluding that we are essential to the production of new knowledge but largely kept out of the strategic decision making about our universities and about dissemination of our artifacts. Therefore, our civic concerns are not something we might hold, as it were, privately: indeed, we can only understand what our professional work may be if we understand how and why it is being shaped by identifiable national and international forces. The age of the Welfare-and-Warfare State saw the culmination of the "cut" from the global surplus we "middle" 10–15 per cent – "administrators, technicians, scientists, educators" were

4 See my "Utopianism from Orientation to Agency: What Are We Intellectuals under Post-Fordism To Do?", *Utopian Studies* 9.2 (1998); "Novum Is as Novum Does," in Karen Sayer & John Moore, eds., *Science Fiction, Critical Frontiers* (New York, 2000); and "What May the 20th Century Amount to: Initial Theses," *Critical Quarterly* 44.2 (2002).

getting;⁵ and "the shouts of triumph of this 'middle' sector over the reduction of their gap with the upper one per cent have masked the realities of the growing gap between them and the other [85–90 per cent]." This trend is since the 1970s being reversed. The class aggression by big corporations against the immediate producers, corporeal and intellectual, means that Jack London's dystopian division of workers under the "Iron Heel" into a minority of indispensable Mercenaries and a mass of downtrodden proletarians (updated by Marge Piercy's SF novel *He, She and It*) has a good chance of being realized. The engineers of material and human resources, the admen and "design" professionals, the new bishops and cardinals of the media clerisy, most lawyers, as well as the teeming swarms of supervisors, are the Post-Fordist "organic" mercenaries.

This reminds me of an apocryphal anecdote: Shklovsky said to Trotsky, "As a literary critic, I'm not interested in war." Trotsky responded, "But war is interested in you."

We cannot escape being involved in the politics and economics of knowledge. Like Gulliver, in Laputa.

5 Immanuel Wallerstein, *Geopolitics and Geoculture* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 83–84.

2. What does this sharp change of circumstances mean for me? I have two answers; one is spatial and existential, the other temporal and professional.

To begin with, I chose to retire in 1999 and transferred back to Europe, where I lived in my formative years and young adulthood and which – for all my admiration of many North American achievements and gratitude to Canada – remains my spiritual home. My move was also a political decision. Not only is it much easier to be a “senior citizen” where there are still chinks in consumer capitalism. It is also that, as Arnold Toynbee remarked half a century ago, “America is today the leader of a world-wide anti-revolutionary movement in defence of vested interests. She now stands for what Rome stood for. Rome consistently supported the rich against the poor in all foreign communities that fell under her sway...”⁷ Paradoxically, I

6 Ibid., pp. 104–05.

7 Arnold Toynbee, *America and the World Revolution and Other Lectures* (New York, 1962), pp. 92–93.

have to defend “America” (that is, the USA known from the media and the military) from most of my European intellectual friends, who are thoroughly disgusted at the reigning discourse in it and at the actions the discourse seeks to justify; I try to point out that from Jefferson and Thoreau to the present day the best and strongest critiques of the United States came from inside: in science fiction, some examples are Thomas Disch’s forgotten masterpiece *334* (which draws a parallel between the US and the Late Roman Empire), and then the many splendid women writers from Joanna Russ and Ursula K. Le Guin on, and then the great dystopian tradition from the 1940s–50s “new maps of hell” on, and then... and then...

Finally, what do the new world circumstances mean for my work as a critic of SF? Criticism is for me still more of an art than anything else, and prescriptions ill fit a fast evolving state of art. Thus I may best answer your question by giving you examples of the shifts I found myself resorting to.⁸ First, they include not writing only about fiction but also taking on with philological tools, according to one’s competence and conscience (both of which can be trained), the Orwellian discourse about war, terrorism, immigrants, and similar issues – exactly what the MLA Delegate Assembly refused to discuss in 2002. This investigation further entails returning to our most kindred ancestral period, to my mind 1917–1945, and writing about Benjamin’s messianism, Brecht’s combative hopes, as well as the role of German academics under Nazism.

Second, when writing about SF and neighboring genres (such as the burgeoning Fantasy of both the “heroic” and “horror” varieties, overwhelmingly to my mind a bad involution that today dominates over SF on the library and bookstore shelves), I focused on the interaction of fictional scenarios and our pressing concerns. This work should not be taken for sociopolitical or philosophical criticism as extrinsic to literary or formal criticism, but for an epistemological rethinking similar to what the best

8 See my titles in Works Cited, especially “Considering,” “Goodbye,” “Reflections,” “Science Fiction Parables,” “Theses,” and “With Sober, Estranging Eyes.” After some hesitation, it finally seemed advantageous to have them identified for those who would want to look some up.

activist critics (liberals in the 19th Century, socialists and feminists in the 20th) have always done, yet striving for new epistemo-political tools to face new necessities. The tools have to be invented. I tried out one such method in revisiting the first and probably still the best SF dystopia, Evgeniy Zamyatin’s *My (We)*, which I like to think mimics the DNA double helix: it braids alternate sections of, on the one hand, how the text looks differently after the fall of the centralized State Leviathan which was its *raison d’être*, and, on the other hand, looking at the new Leviathan of capitalist immiseration and plunder of Russia in order to find out why our eyes have changed. The result is certainly preferable to formalism on

its own (still the ABC of our wisdom) but possibly too mechanical to claim the status of a model. I attempted something similar in an essay about the discourse of cloning in SF and science.

Third, in the discussions of utopianism, I concentrated either on its relation to action or on dystopia, the state we are presently living in and can therefore understand well; furthermore, I strove to differentiate within dystopia between what is and what is not an anti-utopia – a piece of writing explicitly designated to refute a literary and political utopian horizon (such as the gaggle of anti-Bellamy novels following on his *Looking Backward*, and similar manifestations from about 1917 on). Fourth, I investigated also within SF analogs to Benjamin, which can be found in many places, such as the later career of Philip K. Dick – its descent into total police-State dystopia (*A Scanner Darkly*) and its attempt to imagine salvation through a complex and in places ironic divine intervention (the VALIS cycle) – or the best SF writer who has to my mind emerged from the 1990s, K.S. Robinson.

Dixi et salvavi animam meam.

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