

Headnote 2024: the new edn. of *METAMORPHOSES OF SF* has an addition of some new texts published between 1979 and 2015.

PREFACE 2015 TO THE RE-EDITION OF *METAMORPHOSES OF SF*: CONTRADICTION AND RESISTANCE

Darko Suvin

...pity poor flesh
and trees, poor stars and stones, but never this
fine specimen of hypermagical
ultraomnipotence, We doctors know
a hopeless case if—listen: there's a hell
of a good universe next door; let's go
e.e. cummings

Is the Earth so?
Let her change then.
Let the Earth quicken,
Search until you know.

Bertolt Brecht

1.

When Ernst Bloch decided the Stalinist East Germany had become too stifling for him and his work and defected to West Germany, he chose for his first course at the University of Tübingen an Introduction to Philosophy, that is, a *summa*—overview and development—of his 50 years' work on the philosophy of utopian hope, its Marxist possibilities of realisation, and its categories. One of his developments was the introduction of the pair *Widerspruch und Widerstand*, contradiction and resistance (it sounds nicer in German, since in it both terms begin with *wider*—against, anti or contra, literally: counter-speaking and counter-standing).¹ Both are variants of differential opposition (without which, paired with identity, writing and presumably thinking itself are impossible); both “would not exist were there not in the world something that should not be” (109). *Contradiction* is classically the key word of Marxian dialectics: as his teacher Hegel, who erected it into a central logical term, put it in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, “the marvellous appears where there are contradictions,” and earlier it was also “the pulsation indicating life.” The stress on *resistance* however, not only by subjects but especially by real or ideal objects—no doubt a sediment of the bitter experiences of that half-century, embracing the miseries and hopes of two World Wars, Lenin, Hitler, Stalin, the Great Depression, antifascism, and a resurgent capitalism—was new and modified the initial confidence in contradiction as the motor of progress (that is, of radical revolution). It is an antithetic disunity, disruption or tear that does not imply a dialectical rupture point (*Bruchstelle*) where a new quality appears, but on the contrary a hard barrier which leads either to a blank overcoming or to a full stop—either you vault over it or your head runs against the wall (109-10). Epistemologically, the variants of resistance are for Bloch

barrier and limit as figures of “what repressively stands-against (*Wider-stehendes*)”, with the good though rare variant of problem-raising (*Problem-Aufwerfendes*), say in science as resistance in the electrical line or cable (100-04). As a rule, in the first two, resistance in the object is the opposite of the subjects’ Résistance, which Bloch uses in the French spelling and sense of anti-Nazi armed resistance. It is not a critical and creative negation of negation, but can only be “victory, … a triumph over sterile nihilisms” (104-05)—or, I would add, its opposite: defeat, a triumph of sterility. Bloch ends however with the attempt to see the pair of contradiction and resistance as a dialectic that could overcome “the jaws of nothingness” through a solution of the problem raised. Though he realistically acknowledges the danger of resulting in satanic nothingness or at best in the Torment of Tantalus (a promise continually proffered and continually unavailable), as an incurable optimist he believes that triumph is an equally enduring possibility and prospect, though it needs better foundation than heretofore (112-14). In the words of the King James version: O death, where is thy victory?

I bought the two booklets of *Tübinger Einleitung in die Philosophie*, together with some other works of Bloch’s, in particular the major *Principle of Hope*, as soon as they appeared, that is in 1963-64. After my high-school thunderclap of Marx² and the discovery of Brecht in the 1950s, Bloch grew to be a major shaper of my stance, and is especially present within my writings from the “long 1960s.” This is apparent in MOSF, written between 1968 and 1977, whose historical parts rely heavily on the vision of *Principle*, while the theory begins by leaning on Marx and Brecht (alienation vs. estrangement) and ends with Bloch (novum). He was after all talking about the Hope that I too shared. Of course, I like to think this was all in intimate feedback with what I absorbed from my object: first the readings in utopian fiction from 1945 on and in SF from 1942 on, if one counts as such Jules Verne and *Flash Gordon* (comics and one movie); and second, the works discussed in MOSF, from Earthly Paradise and Thomas More through the whole utopian-cum-SF landscape to Wells, Čapek, and the Soviet wave up to 1960. The Bloch influence can later be followed in some essays collected as *Positions and Defined*.

To compare small matters with large and important ones, when I came to McGill University in 1968 and was allowed a course in Science Fiction, I decided, in unconscious imitation of Bloch in 1960, to put my best foot forward and held a year-long one running from More up to Wells. This was registered on magnetic tape, and the transcription provided a first sketch for the historical part of MOSF. It was an exciting time, the famous 1968 and then the following five years, with the successful Vietnamese war for liberation and students demonstrating in the street outside the university. They also eagerly thronged into my course, probably the first ever in Canada on SF and certainly one of the first two or three in North American universities—nevermind in the rest of the world, where the academic establishment had never heard of SF, and if it eventually did, treated it as dirt (in Germany it was officially called “trivial literature”). Thus my self-decided exile from partly socialist Yugoslavia³ in 1967 was revealed as another instance of what Hegel would laicise as the “Happy Fall” into the freedom of working for one’s innermost calling, in this case into the estrangement and cognition of/in SF. For assuming I have given something to SF and utopianism, I was only giving back a reflection of what I got from it, refracted into an explicit argument. In that sense, I was dealing in Hegel’s definition of philosophy as “one’s age reflected in thought” without knowing it. This was a delight: to embark upon the professional enterprise of understanding an innovating and exciting subject as a part and parcel of understanding the sense and value(s) of one’s life and the life of one’s age. The exile or Paradise Lost of alienated life was shot through

with almost a Paradise Regained: where you could work and meet with masterly friends such as Raymond Williams, Bob Elliott, and Fred Jameson, and *al pari* friends such as Don Theall, Marc Angenot, Jim Blish, Dale Mullen, Chuck Elkins, Fred Pohl, and so many other colleagues and students; dialogue with Northrop Frye in Toronto, David Ketterer and Irena Murray right in Montreal, Leslie Fiedler at some conference and Bruce Franklin or Dick Ohmann at many, Brian Aldiss near Oxford, John Brunner and John Clute in London, Umberto Eco in Milan, Henri Desroche and Gérard Klein in Paris, and Louis Marin in Montréal and Paris; even visit the incomparable Ursula Le Guin in Oregon and the grouchy Stanisław Lem in the mountains above Cracow... (Or this at least, cleansed from forgotten daily pettiness and obstacles, is how I retrospectively remember the ambience of MOSF.) At the same time, Mullen asked me to co-edit the new *Science-Fiction Studies*, which I did for seven years, 1975-81, up to and including number 23 where I wrote a “Valedictory” goodbye. In 1980-81 I was with my wife Nena in London for my second sabbatical leave, and wrote there most of *Victorian SF*, my methodologically most advanced book on SF.⁴ It was the high noon of my life.

But retrospectively, as the world has shifted and darkness gathered, MOSF can and alas must also be seen in another way, which does not deny the former one but overlays it now, I cannot guess for how long. My little above discussion of Bloch’s epistemology of resistance or barrier, where he was obviously explaining the failure of projects such as socialism/communism and emancipatory revolution, is to say that we have been caught up and submerged in the long wave of triumphant capitalism, unprecedented in its simultaneously global and capillary intrusion upon our lives with arrogant disregard and destructive technology. It began to be felt in the mid-1970s, its crest was probably in the 1990s, and it seems to have reached a trough around 2008, though it still bloodthirstily rules us as the most horrific zombie movie imaginable. Now MOSF was mainly written before the mid-1970s, and even the parts which came to be done later (last was the essay on the novum) were written while I was still blissfully unaware that the tide of socialism beginning in 1917 had after several ups and downs hit its (for this aeon final) barrier and limit in “neoliberalism.” This book is therefore still shaped by the confident vector, a deep Spinozist *conatus* or striving, toward the horizons of classless freedom, epitomised for me by the visions of many poets from Lucretius and Tu Fu to the present as well as of Marx and Engels, by Lenin’s great utopian *State and Revolution* and pragmatic October Revolution. First and foremost, this vector was based on and inspired by the mass plebeian afflatus of the antifascist resistance. I met it in the shape of the Yugoslav People’s Liberation War 1941-45: a revolution which incidentally saved my life and that of my parents from the Nazis for whom we were nothing but Jews, so that we became as it were its kin by blood.

True, every opportunity is also a danger: Shakespeare put it as “lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.” Fortunately I was saved from black-and-white or monolinear doctrines equally by a certain ironic predisposition, by participation in revolutionary emancipation after 1945, and by my second *maitre à penser*, Brecht. For he had already faced the barrier of reactionary and then fascist Germany, and in his plays, poems, and essays triumphantly solved the problem his “pale mother” country raised by tapping into the energy of the dammed wave and everting it into estrangement—the shock of seeing the real as wrong: a black comedy.

However, the pulverising tsunami of triumphant capitalism mentioned above will bear more analysis. True, MOSF is a product of the 1960s, and indeed in good part of the late 1950s; its positions may be explained but not changed. But as any text (I argued this in my revisit of Zamyatin's *We* after 30 years, see "What Remains"), it is not simply sentences on a page but a dynamic potential to be understood by different classes of readers in different ways. In the fastest changing epoch of human history, death-bearing turbocapitalism, all these classes change fast too, and so does their feedback potential to a given text. What light do these new presuppositions throw on the MOSF potentialities I do not know, but I can at least approach it for one class of readers, those represented by a critic who knows it well and is in this case also its author.

The central stance for my new presuppositions facing blacker times is explicated in a number of my writings in the last 15-20 years, pertaining to what I like to call political epistemology. They can be found in the second half of *Defined*, in Part D of *Darko Suvin: A Life*, and in most of *In Leviathan's*, as well as in some essays not collected in those volumes. Of those, I shall single out the 2009 overview "Death" and apply it for my retrospective look. My conclusions were:

What are the prospects of this rotting mode of production? The Marxist and then the Leninist diagnosis has always been that capitalism finally would not work; this was much too sanguine in its time-horizons, but the case is today stronger than ever. The capitalist economy is, now globally, pursuing a cheap-labour economy on the one hand and the search for new consumer markets on the other; the former undermines the latter. It does not work for the great majority of people, the workers who live from their physical and intellectual work. It does not work for our ecological balance, severely threatened by over-consumption of energy, while to prevent collapse we need a steady-state economy, with growth resulting from efficiency.

And later:

[...] the main product of the hugely productive capitalist civilization is the production of destructive novums, "undermining... the springs of all wealth: the earth and the worker" by practicing "systematic robbery of the preconditions for life..., of space, air, light..." (Marx, *Kapital*) – and today we could add water, silence, health in general, etc.: life and the pursuit of happiness. Death is the final horizon for a civilization of gambling, excitement, fashionable novelty (Benjamin). It is also the end-horizon of raping the planet by wars, economic exploitation, and ecocide.

From this stance, one can see that what is happening has been well named necrocapitalism (see Banerjee, and for our somewhat narrower concerns Neocleous), the violent creation of death-worlds, rampant both in overt wars and in the metropoles of this globalised system. And it becomes clear that "any practice of capitalism [...] is predicated on the production of suffering and destruction..." (Canavan 45). A whole subgenre of "necrofuturist" SF in literature, cinema, and TV (cf. idem 43-52 and *passim*) has picked up on this in various ways, in most cases depicting it cynically as flowing unavoidably out of human nature and furthermore no worse, or indeed better, than any alternative. In the best cases of critical dystopia, to which since mid-70s almost all qualitative SF has belonged, from P.K.

Dick to K.S. Robinson and China Miéville's *Railsea*, it has also supplied some measure of identifying it not only as evil but also as a product of human groups (say, the rich living luxuriously in their satellites in Robinson's 2312) modifiable by other human groups (say, the critical readers and perhaps some of their representatives in the texts) that have obstinately not given up hoping.

I cannot but hope that, even in this new context, some lessons to be drawn from MOSF, will be useful for identifying (and thus helping along) possibilities of Hope the Principle, of resistance. This holds for its theoretical part – the insistence on the link between estrangement and cognition, and on the utopian horizons in SF – and for its historical part, the review of the great emancipatory writings from More through Cyrano to Wells, Zamyatin, and Čapek, who incarnated such strivings in their practices. Death is immortal but so is Eros.

If this would prove at least in part true, an old book might participate in new life.

3.

A few further points arising in or out of MOSF:

- SF is predicated, as is the modern theory of Possible Worlds in logics (or better in semiotics), on the category of *potentiality*. It is a better word than the largely synonymous “possibility” because it suggests, from Aristotle's key discussion onwards, that it is an *inside* potential of the moving matter at hand, coiled within it as the DNA helix in our chromosomes, thus today also called actualisability. It pertains for him to all being, one of the main ways of understanding which is “in accordance with potentiality and realisation” (*Metaphysics* Book IX 1045b-1049a, in *Selections* 324-32). As Gramsci pithily remarked: “Possibility is not reality, but it is also a reality: the fact that people can or cannot do something has its importance in evaluating what they really do. Possibility means ‘freedom’” (II 1337-38, cf. E 360). This freedom follows many necessities but transcends absolute necessity. In that sense, all valid SF is libertarian if and insofar as it uses true possibility (rosy or black), not just the lower form of simple or undirected evasion from actuality. And I have throughout my writing, most clearly in my last book on ex-Yugoslavia, argued that hypothetical questions about alternative possibilities or potentialities—concerning, for example, a social form that has come into contradiction with its founding horizon and forces— are not only allowable, but even indispensable insofar as they allow open argumentation about the evaluation criteria for any such form, which would otherwise remain unspoken.

Thus, if one wants to speak about a relation between SF and Marxism (or any other liberatory upswell from the plebeian depths), it would be best not to dwell primarily on the –ism doctrines but on the liberatory impulse and horizon. Is it or is it not present? Is it only the stunted narcissism of, say (and choosing the best of this ideological variant), most Larry Niven, logically ending in militarism (see my “Of Starship”), or is it the wry understanding how collective and personal liberties intertwine and need each other of, say (to list personal favourites), Mitchison, Le Guin, the Strugatskys, Piercy, Kim Stanley Robinson, Gibson?

• Is MOSF “normative”? I dwelt on this—to my mind mainly hypocritical because nonsensical—objection in some lectures between 10 and 20 years ago which have the advantage of brevity. What I concluded was yes and no. Significant facts are epistemic and thus normative: “[T]he ability to recognize that something looks green presupposes the concept [and norm, DS] of being green.... [This in turn presupposes a] long process of publicly reinforced responses to public objects... in public situations” (Sellars 43 and 78).

Thus, *homo sapiens sapiens* is (people are) a norm-creating animal, there’s no way out of that. Nihilism is only useful insofar as it destroys norms and values which deserve that (Beckett, in part Nietzsche), 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 sets of norms. Somewhere around the time of the Industrial Revolution (1) and (2) became interchangeable: that is, monotheism doesn’t work any more at a time of observably rapid change for each generation. It would be fair critique to say that MOSF suffers from some lingering after-effects of monotheism, meaning the belief in one certain set of truths. Being always deeply persuaded that history is real and social groups are real too, therefore all value-systems are specific to given spacetimes, surely

I tried to avoid it, but that was difficult for one brought up in a post-Christian culture. Today, with the experiences since this book was published, we can all see that more clearly. Shintoist (or any animist) polytheism is much better; Daoist atheism but *not* non-normativity (its original impulse, as I understand it) better still. I was in the 90s summoned in Taiwan 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 exist for given purposes normative systems—however flexible and complex—which enable us to say that David Feintuch and Dean Koontz wrote *bad* SF, whereas Marge Piercy or Stan Robinson write *good* SF. Furthermore, the first novel by William Gibson was *good* whereas the succeeding ones were less and less good, until he came out of the trough in the 90s. So, in a way, if Post-Modernism means no norms (which would be its disgregating norm), then I’m an impenitent modernist, with Brecht, Picasso, Joyce, Eisenstein, and Lenin (and Lao Tse, maybe the one out of Brecht’s poem on him) *contra mundum*. The Post-Modernist hegemony in the Western universities after the mid-70s found this more and more excessive. Well, but I was always an Ibsenian “enemy of the people” as against 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—say a heart operation. And if something pretending to a difference is in fact stale old meat in a new sauce (as a western with ray-guns 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.

• As to the well-known Tables in MOSF, here is an expanded form I used since mid-90s in my lectures. The following table might clarify the relationships of “naturalistic” narrative

genres, mythical genres, and SF. It is historically valid only since the rise of the scientific method. I do not claim it is more than a partial way of approaching the matter: it does not include emotions, or metaphorics, or social classes, or labour (we need more dimensions):

<u>POSSIBLE (HISTORICAL, NATURAL) WORLDS</u> (universe neutral toward consciousness)		<u>IMPOSSIBLE (MYTHICAL, SUPERNATURAL) WORLDS</u> (universe oriented toward consciousness)
<u>Socially Recognized Law or Norm</u> Present in our encyclopedia (physically possible, verifiable scientifically or empirically)	<u>Socially Not Yet Recognized Law or Norm</u> Continuous with our encyclopedia (logically possible, verifiable by thought experiment)	<u>Anti-cognitive Law or Norm (Ideology in the Bad Sense)</u> Myth or <i>lore/doxa</i> (unverifiable)
<u>Mundane (Empirical) World, Actuality</u> Historical past Mundane present Extrapolated future	<u>Estranged (Alternative) World, Potentiality</u> Fictive history (partly incl. fictive natural and social knowledges)	<u>Mythic (Metaphysical) World</u> Various timeless and ahistorical narrative conventions
<u>“Naturalistic” or <u>Realistic</u>” Narrative Genres</u> Adventure story; Individualistic story; many other subdivisions	<u>Estranged Narrative Genres</u> SF; Pastoral; Satire; Parody; etc.	<u>Mythic or Metaphysical Narrative Genres</u> Fairytales/Folktales; Horror Fantasy; Hero Fantasy

- What do I regret happening with or against MOSF (except the hands-down victory of capitalism)? Not really that a younger generation is seeking after its own norms and definitions—that is normal in times of rapid change, though exacerbated by the Hobbesian need to kill one’s father. It is further exacerbated by the US and UK tradition of extreme empiricism and nominalism, which makes most critical objections to me not so much opposed to as unaware of the philosophy informing my philology—for example about the norms discussed above. But first, I much regret that reason itself (intelligence, cognition) has been sullied by its use for oppression, immiseration, and killing, so that many have been lured into abandoning causality as a whole instead of monolinear causality only, and thus abandoned the cognitive possibility of understanding how to get out of where we are today. Second, I much regret that my rather painstaking overview of what I took to be SF history from Thomas More and the planetary romances on has been left practically forgotten. The

attempt to connect studies of More, Cyrano, or Twain (and so on) with studies of SF has been a failure. So much the worse for all of us.

•I shall not get into what I regret not to have done in and after MOSF. I have done this in my “Afterword” to Parrinder ed. of 2000, which I much hope anybody interested in my argumentation about how to approach SF would read, as a companion piece to this brief preface; any amplifications of it would not alter its horizon.

Notes

1. See *Tübinger* Vol. 2, from which are all citations from Bloch here. Sartre’s “counterfinality of the practico-inert,” formulated roughly at the same time as a result of kindred experiences, seems to be a first cousin of Bloch’s resistance. All translations in this essay are mine.

2. Described at length in my “Slatki dani, strašni dani.”

3. With which I have settled accounts in my latest book, *Splendour, Misery, and Potentialities: An X-ray of Socialist Yugoslavia*, at present available only in the Croatoserbian version of *Samo*, while the English original [has been published by Brill in 2016].

4. See on Mullen my obituary contribution “[Some],” which the *S-FS* editors amputated of its title. To the pool of people with whom I frequently discussed SF and utopia/nism should be added the names in the *S-FS* advisory board, best in 1980. For all my other engagements at that time in four other fields, see my c.v. at 2 links: Wordpress site: <https://darkosuvin.com/> and Academia Site: <https://independent.academia.edu/DarkoSuvin>

They are: 1) in SF, say as chair of two conferences on SF and on Wells in 1971 and a large international one on Science Fiction and Criticism at University of Palermo 1978; 2) in Brecht and modern dramaturgy studies, where I wrote nine essays later collected in the book *To Brecht*; 3) in writing poetry; 4) in Comparative Literature, a new graduate programme founded by three of us where I was cross-appointed since 1976. At the beginning of the c.v. on those sites is a list of what I consider significant criticism about my work. See also “Darko Suvin: Checklist” and “Bibliography A” in the Works Cited.

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