

Red Planets

Marxism and Science Fiction

Edited by

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55. Raymond Williams, *Culture* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1981), pp. 194–6.
56. Bruce Sterling, 'Cyberpunk in the nineties', *Interzone* 38, pp. 39–41.
57. Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 174.
58. See UNESCO, *Index Translationum* (First Quarter, Paris: UNESCO, 2008).
59. See Damon Knight, *The Futurians* (New York: John Day, 1977).
60. Williams, 'Utopia and Science Fiction', p. 209; emphasis in original.

AFTERWORD

COGNITION AS IDEOLOGY: A DIALECTIC OF SF THEORY

China Miéville

The Negation of Some Negation or Other

Implicit in an early proposed subtitle of this collection – 'Marxism, Science Fiction, Fantasy' – was an argument, even a polemic, with and about something approaching an orthodoxy. In conceiving its remit as Marxist approaches to SF *and* fantasy, the clause implies that it is due to more than coincidence or bad taxonomy that the two sub-genres are shelved near each other: that they are, in fact, at some important and constitutive level, united.

This is neither an uncontroversial contention nor a new debate. Since the publication of his seminal *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979), the most powerful current in SF scholarship, particularly in Marxist/*Marxist* traditions, has been that of Darko Suvin, according to which SF and fantasy are and must remain not only radically distinct but hierarchically related. To briefly restate familiar positions, in Suvin's enormously and justly influential, if by now somewhat notorious, approach, SF is characterised by 'cognitive estrangement', in which the alienation from the everyday effected by the non-realist setting – 'an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment'¹ – is 'cognitively' organised. As one of various Others implied by that model, generic fantasy comes in for a particular savaging, because, though it also 'estranges', it is 'committed to the imposition of anti-cognitive laws', is 'a sub-literature of mystification',² 'proto-Fascist', anti-rationalist, anti-modern, 'overt ideology plus Freudian erotic patterns'.³ Suvin

acknowledges that the boundaries between SF and fantasy are often blurred, at the levels of creation, reception and marketing, but this he sees not only as 'rampantly sociopathological',⁴ but 'a terrible contamination'.⁵

In the last decade this paradigm has come under increasing question (including by Andrew Milner, in his essay in this volume). Nonetheless, this broadly 'Suvinian' approach remains dominant. In 2000, Suvin himself re-examined the genres and revised his earlier 'blanket rejection' of fantasy to consider it a worthy object of analysis, in an important but frustrating essay, by turns brilliantly perspicacious and abruptly theoretically foreclosed.⁶ Admirable fantasy is now acknowledged as at least a possibility, though one less likely than similarly laudable SF – but it is telling that, even here, Suvin's grudging open-mindedness is not predicated on any erosion of the proposed firewall between fantasy and SF,⁷ but is an *unfortunate necessity*: the quantitative explosion of fantasy (an expression of social traumas) and ebbing of SF is a situation the critic 'may to a large extent rightly dislike'⁸ but is one with which it is her intellectual responsibility to engage.

Arguably the two most important recent Marxist works on SF, both drawing in key (if not uncritical) ways on Suvin, continue to privilege SF over a sharply distinguished fantasy. Fredric Jameson, for whom the utopian function is the fundamental unit of what radicalism SF possesses, describes fantasy, which lacks SF's 'epistemological gravity' as 'technically reactionary'.⁹ According to Carl Freedman's *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, supposedly cognition-less fantasy can offer at best 'irrationalist estrangements'.¹⁰ (The strength of this tradition, and its ideological hold even on those critical of it, may be one reason why – with no intentionality that either editor can recall – fantasy disappeared from this volume's subtitle and the information for contributors.)

Elsewhere, I have argued that this sharp distinction is untenable.¹¹ Indeed, I believe that the embedded condescension and even despite towards fantasy that this paradigm has bequeathed stands as perhaps the major obstruction to theoretical progress in the field. However, given the importance of so much work

indebted to the Suvinian position, as well as its extraordinary paradigmatic resilience – and in the face of all the cheerful consumption-level blurring of that SF/fantasy boundary that Milner points out – this intervention starts not from opposition, but submission. Here I accept the predicates and concomitant heuristic efficacy of the SF/fantasy distinction, and from there attempt an immanent critique.

The paradigm's lacunae and possible strategies for overcoming them arise precisely from following its own logic, through its nuancing particularly in the hands of Freedman. The conclusions to be drawn are, I hope, not so much paradoxical as – perhaps campily – dialectical. I will argue that the position's logic not only demands and offers a too-often unnoticed auto-*ideologikritik*, but ends up collapsing the supposed 'specificity' and superiority of SF derived from it. This is not so much an argument against as a sublation of this tenacious generic antithesis, an apparent rebuke to Suvinianism reached precisely through fidelity to the Suvin event.

Cognition and Possibility

It is nothing new, of course, to point out that much of the supposed science in SF is precisely that – supposed. More than that, it is often mistaken, spurious or 'pseudo'. Nor is it new to raise the question of whether and how such inaccurate predicates disqualify a work from being SF. Remarkably, the debate in fact pre-exists the genre proper, and is inherited by it, as evidenced by Jules Verne's irritation at H.G. Wells' straight-faced flim-flam as compared to his own supposed scientific accuracy, and his sense that this excluded Wells' work from a rigorous literature of extrapolation.¹² This drive to disqualify can still be seen among some of the more unforgiving readers and writers of so-called 'hard SF', for whom scientific inaccuracies can count more or less definitionally as literary flaws.

That such fallacies are embedded in countless SF texts, and that this might raise theoretical questions about the nature of a genre of 'cognitive estrangement', is clear. Caveats about the possible non-

isomorphism of the one to the other notwithstanding, 'cognition' is generally conceived of in terms of, or at least intimately related to, a rigorous and rational – 'scientific' – relationship to material reality itself.¹³ This lies behind the repeated classic distinction that SF's worlds are 'possible', whereas fantasy's are 'impossible' – which itself locates the *science* in science fiction.¹⁴ But, as Adam Roberts points out, 'several of the frequently deployed "nova" of SF are things that "science" has specifically ruled out of court as literally impossible',¹⁵ so scientific 'possibility' cannot be the grounds of 'cognition' for the post-Suvinian definition to hold.

The paradigm can, however, recover from this. '[I]t is not the "truth" of science that is important to SF', in Roberts' words, 'it is the scientific method', and it is this that is the 'cognitive logic' in 'cognitive estrangement'.¹⁶ Recognising the lack of clarity on this point as a 'serious' problem in a paradigm to which he is rigorously committed, Carl Freedman goes further than any other writer in theorising this nuanced sense of cognition as 'cognitive logic' as being at the heart of SF. According to his reformulated Suvinianism,

cognition proper is *not*, in the strictest terms, exactly the quality that defines science fiction. What is rather at stake is what we might term ... the *cognition effect*. The crucial issue for generic discrimination is not an epistemological judgment external to the text itself on the rationality or irrationality of the latter's imaginings, but rather ... the attitude *of the text itself* to the kind of estrangements being performed.¹⁷

This is an ingenious move, one that is simultaneously innovative and a systematisation of something *unsurprising* – a certain generic common-sense that has allowed generations of readers and writers to treat, say, faster-than-light drives as science-fictional in a way that dragons are not, despite repeated assurances from the great majority of physicists that the former are no less impossible than the latter.

That is not, however, the end of the story. Despite the elegance of this solution, it raises as many problems as it solves. With his focus on the attitude of 'the text itself', Freedman laudably attempts to retain some taxonomic rigour by evading the

subjectivity concomitant with theories based on reader response or authorial intent. However, strictly speaking 'the text itself', of course, has *no* attitude to the kind of estrangements it performs, nor indeed to anything else.

Taken literally, Freedman's insistence that C.S. Lewis' SF trilogy, starting with *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), 'considers that principles it regards as cognitively valid cannot exclude events like the action fictionally portrayed from occurring within the author's actual environment'¹⁸ makes little sense. Lewis' trilogy considers no such thing: it does nothing, in fact, but sit there. Of course that is not the end of the matter, because i) despite any such uncharitable literalism, taken in context as distinguishing the register of Lewis' work (here deemed science-fictional) from that of Tolkien (here paradigmatic of fantasy), *one knows what Freedman means*; and ii) the reason that one does so is that Lewis' trilogy does not in fact just sit there: it sits there in its having-been-written-ness, and its being-read-ness.

In other words, our fidelity to Freedman's own fidelity to Suvin necessarily, in its very focus on the text itself, involves not just a reminder of but a necessary theoretical engagement with the fact that the text does not exist in an a-sociological vacuum. Though they certainly cannot be reduced to intent or opinion, and must be considered in terms of social structure and mediation, questions of human social agency vis-à-vis and relations to the text are inevitable and central.

On this basis, the question, then, becomes, *whose* cognition effect? More pertinently, whose cognition? And whose effect?

Doing Things With Words

This reformulated approach to the specificity of SF, in terms of a written-and-read text, means considering SF not in terms of a text's relationship to its own supposed 'cognitive logic' but as *something done with language by someone to someone*.

This implication of our re-socialised conception of the shift from cognition to 'cognition effect' is again not a new insight, but has in various articulations been a common-sense understanding

since at least Wells, who conceived of his task as a writer of 'fantastic stories' as being 'to help the reader to play the game properly', and to 'domesticate the impossible hypothesis' with 'some plausible assumption'.¹⁹

It was the potential incommensurability of the text's 'cognition' and reality that led Freedman to his formulation of the cognition effect. However, Wells sees his job not as *convincing* anyone of a spurious claim but of helping '*domesticate*' an *impossibility*: this cheerful and perspicacious admission makes clear that within these texts, not only the 'cognition' but the 'cognition effect' too is *radically contingent* to any actually accurate facticity. Of course that effect *may* be derived from empirical reality and rigorous and rational science: but it is vital to insist, as Wells does, on the potentially absolute discontinuity between the two, on the fact that the effect is the result of a strategy, or a *game*, played by writer and, often, reader, based not on reality-claims but plausibility-claims that hold purely within the text.

Descriptively, this is perfectly obvious, and regularly noted; but its radical implications for the theory of the cognition effect have not been sufficiently remarked. It forces the theorist away from the comforting implication that the 'attitude of the text itself', to put it in Freedman's terms, is necessarily one of good faith. It is perhaps an implicit hankering for such clear-cut cases that lies behind the common focus in the literature on texts predicated on science that is seemingly accurate but that has later been disproved, and behind a certain conceptual privileging of that category over, or its elision with, SF built instead on deliberate falsehoods.

Roberts, for example, considers those '[m]any early SF novels [that] followed the scientific thinking of the day' to argue that the later overturning of those nostrums 'does not invalidate these novels because the point about the science in SF is not "truth" but the entry into a particular material and often rational discourse'.²⁰ Even if one agrees, it is a somewhat weak argument that SF is not predicated on scientific 'truth' that starts with those texts that *were* predicated on what was held to be true. Scientific accuracy as a conceptual foundation of SF here sneaks back in even as it is dismissed.

Freedman explicitly insists that 'overwhelmingly' SF is a 'genuinely cognitive literature',²¹ but it is telling that, even discussing the harder cases where it appears not so to be, he stacks the deck. For example, he recalls that Isaac Asimov humorously refused to change his story 'The Dying Night' (1956), which was predicated on 'common astronomical wisdom at the time of the story's composition' that was later disproved, to 'suit the "whims" of astronomers'.²² Freedman rightly insists that this in no way undermines the cognition effect – indeed, that the astronomical facts had 'nothing to do' with it.²³ However, it is rather startling that his admission of the necessity of the disaggregation of cognition and cognition effect comes in a discussion of a text for which the cognition effect *was* in fact a corollary of actual cognition – just one that was later revised as erroneous.

The case of SF constructed on 'some plausible assumption' that is *always known* by the writer (and very possibly the reader) to be untrue is, contrary to Freedman's assertion, extremely common. Indeed, to Wells it is foundational to the genre. It is also far more theoretically troublesome. The theorist might simply dismiss such work from the genre, but not only would that delineate an extraordinarily depleted field (no Wells!), but, having done so, it would reduce theory to the job of a mere border guard. Mindful that there are always taxonomic grey areas, it seems sensible, in constructing a theory of SF, to have it be a theory of actually-existing SF, rather than of some tautologous ideal-type.

Following Wells, the question then arises: If cognition and the cognition effect are sometimes radically discontinuous, then what is the source of that cognition effect? Definitionally, it is not cognitive logic. One must insist on this: *pace* Freedman, even if, in a particular case, a particular set of cognition-effect-producing claims *are* 'cognitive' and accurate, the cognition effect *tout court* is a category existentially necessary precisely because it is *not* reducible to a logic derived from cognition. What is more, the cognition effect is a category shared across the spectrum of SF, from works based on the scientifically correct, through those based on the believed-but-mistaken, to those based on the wildly

spurious. The effect's fundamental driver cannot be cognitive logic itself.

Having split the cognition effect from cognition and its logic, we must add to the formulation of SF as something done with language by someone(s) to someone(s) the question *how*? Again, the answer has been known for decades.

Wells, in his rather scandalous defence of invented science, has it that the writer 'must trick [the reader] into an unwary concession ... and get on with his story while the illusion holds'.²⁴ The method, then, is a *trickery* effected by the author – or, if it is preferred, author-function – through the text. In SF *sensu stricto*, an *apparently* cognitively logical and rigorous 'scientific' register is invaluable to this; but, crucially, that register is *already mediated* and is not the source of the cognition effect.

As Gwyneth Jones points out, for SF, what is necessary is not accuracy but 'appearance of command over the *language* of science'.²⁵ The emphasis within her formulation, however, best lies elsewhere: SF relies above all not on the language of science, nor on the command of that language, but on the *appearance* of that command. *(i.e. rhetorical, i.e. manipulative)*

The cognition effect is a *persuasion*. Whatever tools are used for that persuasion (which may or may not include actually-cognitively-logical claims), the effect, by the testimony of SF writers for generations and by the logic of the very theorists for whom cognition is key, is a function of (textual) *charismatic authority*. The reader surrenders to the cognition effect to the extent that he or she surrenders to the authority of the text and its author function.

This persuasion, even though 'trickery', is doubtless generally ludic on both sides. Indeed, an awareness of that game-like nature of the interaction can take us a step beyond even a new clarity as to how 'pseudo-science' known to be such by the *author* can still be SF in a meaningful fashion: now, by focusing on consensual authority, we can see how the cognition effect can inhere where the reader, too, knows that the 'cognitive' claims made are specious.

Nor is this a marginal concern for SF. Wells' is not a theory of SF as hoodwinking: it is extremely unlikely that many of his

readers would ever have been convinced of the possibility of gravity-repellent cavorite,²⁶ but because of the particular kind of authority in the text, a cognition effect is created even though neither writer nor reader finds cognitive logic in the text's claims. Instead, they *read/write as if they do*. *“a.s. 1f”*

This understanding makes sense also of how the presence of the even more preposterous pseudo-science of, say, 1950s B-movie SF does not disqualify a text from membership of the SF genre-cluster. Indeed, there is nothing so specious that a reader may not be persuaded to surrender to it as-if cognitively – which, though it is not the same as believing it, pretends that it is.

There is an experienced bundle of understandings about what it is that makes some texts SF rather than fantasy – a generic folk-understanding. Given that how that specificity is perceived is part of whatever quiddity that specificity has, any attempt to theorise actually-existing SF has to take those understandings seriously. There is little doubt that the Freedman/Suvin theory is accurate in asserting that, for that folk-understanding of SF-not-fantasy, SF-ness is a function of the cognition effect – an embedded relation in the text between cognition and the reality function. However, any claim that the effect is a function of embedded cognitive rational rigour is untrue. To the extent that the cognition effect is about cognition, it is precisely *about* it, *about* a putatively logical way of thinking, not a function of it. And inasmuch as the experienced effect is in fact a function of authority, the 'cognition effect', in deriving supposed cognitive logic from external authority, is not only fundamentally a-rational but also intensely ideological. (?)

The Degradation of Science

The cognition effect – a term which grows more sinister the more the phenomenon is critically interrogated – surrenders the terrain of supposed conceptual logic and rigour to the whims and diktats of a cadre of 'expert' author-functions. This is a translation into meta-literary and aggrandising terms of the very layer of technocrats often envisaged in SF and its cultures as society's best hope. This fond fantasy of a middlebrow-utopian bureaucracy – what Wells

called Samurai – is a vaguely Fabian sociological articulation of the traditional SF hero, the *engineer*,²⁷ deploying narrowly (and ideologically) conceived instrumental rationality, often in the form of applied science, to the bettering of the world. In light of this, and of the uncomfortably patrician and anti-democratic class politics of which this tendency was and is an expression, Suvin's passing claim that the fictional 'novum' operates by 'hegemony'²⁸ is invested with rather unhappy connotations.

There is no call to be po-faced about this: ideological this 'suspension of disbelief' may be, but as a literary-level 'consensual' surrender, it is inextricable from enjoyment of the genre, and strictly in and of itself at the level of form (i.e. irrespective of the concrete ideologies of specific texts) inherent genocidal apology or the maintenance of capitalism it is not. Nor, however, is it innocent – not even of all relation to those most extreme articulations of modern barbarity.²⁹

As this immanent *ideologiekritik* of SF and of the Suvinian paradigm – derived, to reiterate, not in opposition but fidelity to that paradigm – reminds us, these structuring levels of textual ideology at the level of SF-as-form (which go beyond those specific to a text's content) include this surrender of cognition to authority. There is also, and derived from this, the level of the ideology of the theory: the Suvinian–Freedmanite paradigm itself.

Even before any dialectical negation of the so-called 'cognitive logic' central to the model, the constant and explicit privileging of SF over fantasy is based on the supposedly self-evident grounds of that 'cognitive logic'. Here, a peculiar nostalgia is clear. As the link to the Edisonian engineer above is intended to illustrate, this supposed logic is repeatedly, if not explicitly, related to a strangely prelapsarian, often instrumentalised, science and bureaucratic rationality. To the extent that SF claims to be based on 'science', and indeed on what is deemed 'rationality', it is based on capitalist modernity's ideologically projected self-justification: not some abstract/ideal 'science', but capitalist science's bullshit about itself. This is not, of course, to argue in favour of some (perhaps lumpen-postmodernist) irrationalism, but that the 'rationalism' that capitalism has traditionally had on offer is highly partial and

ideological – 'could not', as Suvin himself has put it, 'but give reason a bad name'.³⁰ The desire is for a richer, socially embedded rationality, which would not be a degraded embarrassment.

In the aftermaths of two world wars and a holocaust which saw 'hard' and social science harnessed to mass industrial slaughter – an epoch which unsurprisingly shattered the bourgeois reformist daydreams of ineluctable progress-through-rationality – and following the aesthetic upheavals of the radical modernisms (including their pulp-fantastic wings) that were born out of a repudiation of that species of capitalist–comprador rationalism that was all that had been officially on offer, one might expect Marxist theory, which has for several generations drawn out these connections, to exhibit a certain caution about claims of the self-evident progressiveness of self-styled rationalism. One might consider, with apologies for the thickets of scare-quotes to stress the point, that the model of a 'scientific rationality' that is 'progressive' in opposition to 'reactionary' 'irrationalism' is, generously, roughly nine decades out of date – a bad joke after World War I, let alone after the death camps. Yet this model is at the heart of the *grundnorm* of mainstream Marxist theory of SF. Astonishingly, as I have argued, it has been so in full knowledge that the claims about 'cognitive logic' are *specious*, as when Jameson explicitly privileges SF utopias over 'generic fantasy' on the grounds of the gravity granted by the former's 'scientific pretensions'.³¹

In fact, this simultaneous adoption by the genre's writers, readers and theorists of SF's self-declared 'rationalist' agenda, and their clear-sightedness about the spuriousness of its predicates, is an important reminder of the fact that the purchase of ideology, in all spheres, is dependent on the persuasive power not of its specific and explicit truth-claims, but of the ideological project as a self-sustaining totality. The lies of ideology, in other words, do not necessarily do their job by being believed, but by hegemonising a conceptual agenda irrespective of whether they are believed.³²

In ideology, charisma and authority become autotelic – that is their point. In mediated microcosm, this is how SF can easily

and with some justification end up being defined as that which is written by an SF writer.

Specificity *Contra* Specificity

This immanent reformulation should act to puncture the science-fictional scorn at fantasy, and the still-prevalent sense among Marxist SF critics that fantasy, the projected Other of a supposedly rationalist SF, is intrinsically, in its literary form, 'theoretically illegitimate'.³³ If SF itself is at the level of form ideology, the contrast no longer has teeth.

This is not, it should but perhaps does not go without saying, to suggest a simple inversion of the traditional Marxist hierarchy of SF and fantasy. It might, for example, be tempting and excitingly flattering to analogise from the model above that SF operates as a corollary of the utopian spirit by a secular literary priesthood, whereas fantasy – for which no such ideological and constraining cognition effect inheres, and through which therefore the reader experiences an unmediated relation to the radical estrangement – mimics the radical democratisation of vision effected by ecstatic sects, for which the repudiation of a priestly caste was an emancipatory act.

It might be tempting, but it would be utterly ridiculous. For one thing, as certain wings of fantastic fiction (especially classic 'weird fiction') illustrate well, whatever the radicalism of actual ecstatic sects in their revolutionary periods, the structuring of literature around an unmediated numinous is often not merely reactionary but crypto- or even openly fascist.³⁴

(?) The idea that, because SF is deep-structured by an ideological conception of the world, fantasy is less so, is foolish. The claim that fantasy is in some systematic way resistant to ideology or rebellious against authority is, as anyone who knows the genre can attest, laugh-out-loud funny.

Apart from anything else, it is of course not in fact the case that, for fantasy, the estrangement, radical or otherwise, is unconstrained. In fact, precisely what distinguishes genre fantasy from the more freeform alienation of, say, surrealism and other

avant-gardes is that the genre's integration of that alienation from reality with pulp exigency leads to its control and 'domestication' by the logic of *narrative*. This narrative logic, while perhaps in various ways enabling, and endlessly celebrated in mainstream culture and even by radical critics,³⁵ is also without question both constraining and ideological. Considered thus, the ideology of the cognition effect is but one particular organising principle behind that structuring temporo-moral ideology of narrative itself, which demands further critical investigation.

Fantasy, then, in its form as well as its many contents, is no less an ideological product than SF is. However, nor is it more so.

In recent years there has been a creeping Marxist *rapprochement* with fantasy, and concomitant new approaches to the sub-genre's specifics.³⁶ It is beyond the remit of this intervention to examine these, or indeed fantasy itself, in any detail. Two things, however, are clear.

One is that, at the sociological level of production and consumption, the distinction between SF and fantasy continues to be pertinent, and that there are specificities to the fantastic, as well as to the science-fictional, side of the dyad (the deployment of magic, most obviously), which theory would do well to investigate further. It is perfectly plausible, then, that SF and fantasy might still sometimes be usefully distinguished: but if so, it is not on the basis of cognition, nor of some fundamental epistemological firewall, but as different ideological iterations of the 'estrangement' that, even in high Suvinianism, both sub-genres share.

The specifics of that estrangement need unpicking. One potential pitfall of the focus among Marxists on the sub-genre of utopian fiction, the sense that the fundamental *differentia specifica* of fantastic fiction, and certainly what gives it any political teeth, is a utopia-function (which can easily, of course, encompass dystopias), is an implicit, sometimes explicit, claim that non-utopian SF and fantasy are in some way at best *attenuated utopias*. But we should not be seduced by the long and honourable tradition of left utopias and utopian studies into foreclosing the reverse possibility (which better serves the project of theorising *actually-existing* SF and fantasy, rather than ring-

fencing segments of the fields): that utopias (including dystopias) are, rather, specific articulations of *alterity*, and that it is of that that SF/fantasy is the literature. In this model, the atom of SF's and fantasy's estrangement, in other words, is their unreality function, of which utopia is but one – if highly important – form.

Taking alterity as a starting point might allow us to trace structural relations between fantastic genres and the anti-realist avant-garde. It might also allow a revisiting with critical rigour of a traditional – and traditionally denigrated as woolly and anti-theoretical – notion of the 'sense of wonder', as intrinsic to the field.³⁷

Of course this is highly tentative. Whatever we deem the irreducible unit of fantastic estrangement to be, and wherever that might lead us theoretically, all of this underlines a second point. At the same sociological level at which SF and fantasy continue to be distinguished, the boundaries between them also – if anything at an accelerating pace – continue to erode. Where that has hitherto been seen as pathological in SF theory, it is to be hoped that, by undermining the supposedly radical distinction between the two on the basis of cognition, that erosion can now be seen as perfectly legitimate.

One could go further. It might be claimed that the continual efforts to parcel out a separate realm of estranging fiction corralled by a nostalgic, neo-Fabian and ideological conception of legitimate and illegitimate modes of cognition has been a stunting factor in the development of a radical, aesthetically estranging and narratologically rigorous literature of literalised metaphor and alterity.

Of course that might be hogwash. Or, trivially and most likely, both the boundaries and their breaching might continue both to enable and constrain creativity and innovation in fantastic fiction. At the very least, however, it is to be hoped that the theoretical focus might shift from the conventional but epiphenomenal distinctions that have long been deemed definitional to the field, to the fundamental alterity-as-estrangement shared *across* the field: what it does; how it does it; and what we might do with it. For that, Marxist theory needs to continue its thaw towards fantasy

It may be too early to effect that thaw by the insistence on a shared generic substance with SF. Even if, as I hold, this claim is accurate, it is perhaps strategically inadequate. Here I have attempted to undermine the supposed specificity of SF by respecting and interrogating that specificity. A mirror-image operation might work, too. To blur the boundaries further, it might be efficacious to respect the unstable specifics – but specifics nonetheless – of that contingently bundled sub-genre, 'fantasy'. Precisely to continue the project of theorising a conjoined SF and fantasy, in other words, SF, with its tendency to hegemonise the conversation, might have to be temporarily excluded.

Red Planets we have. We should not neglect the red dragons.

Notes

1. Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 8.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
5. Horst Pukallus, 'An Interview with Darko Suvin', *Science Fiction Studies* 18: 2 (1991), available at www.depauw.edu/sfs/interviews/suvin54.htm (accessed 17 July 2008).
6. Darko Suvin, 'Considering the Sense of "Fantasy" or "Fantastic Fiction": An Effusion', *Extrapolation* 41: 3 (2000), p. 211. This fascinating, fecund and infuriating constellation of insights and questionable extrapolations deserves an extended and dedicated engagement that is beyond my scope here.
7. The two are still constitutively opposed, and there are still 'more obstacles to liberating cognition' in fantasy (Suvin, 'Considering the Sense of "Fantasy"', p. 211).
8. Suvin, 'Considering the Sense of "Fantasy"', p. 210.
9. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 57, 60. Christopher Kendrick (personal communication) points out that 'though Jameson does endorse the Suvin thesis, his actual position on the fantasy question is different from Suvin's. Jameson basically casts fantasy as backward in relation to SF because it "goes back to" romance, and so tends to "believe in" good and evil, or in other words to be ethical; SF, on the other hand, he associates with a "mode

of production aesthetic", which is presumably economic-political rather than ethical in basic orientation.' While Jameson's position is closely related to Suvin's, Kendrick speculates that, to the extent that it is to be *equated* with it, it is perhaps 'as an attempt to rationalise what in Suvin tends to appear as prejudice'. This extremely intriguing formulation demands further investigation.

10. Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), p. 43.
11. For example, John Newsinger, 'Fantasy and Revolution: An Interview with China Miéville', *International Socialism* 88 (2000), available at www.marxists.de/culture/sci-fi/newsinger.htm.
12. See China Miéville, 'Introduction' to H.G. Wells, *First Men in the Moon* (London: Penguin, 2005).
13. Quite how evasive a term 'cognition' is is something few of its deployers engage with sufficiently. In his reconsideration of fantasy, Suvin states that 'cognition is much richer than, and in some ways even opposed to, scientific rationalism' (Suvin, 'Considering', p. 239). However, this suggestive qualification is not fleshed out, the model(s) of 'cognition' rather nebulously emerging as a function of whether it 'include[s] people' rather than being dominated by abstractions (p. 239), is narratively coherent with 'richness of figures' (p. 240) and is 'pleasantly useful' (p. 211). Alongside these intriguing fragments of an alternative theory of (what is increasingly unhelpful to term) cognition, however, sits the traditional underlying claim that 'the epistemology of SF can appeal to the cognitive universalism of natural and/or social laws' as opposed to the 'occultism, whimsy or magic' models of fantasy (p. 238). This puts Suvin back in accord with his earlier self, for whom SF takes a fictional hypothesis 'and develops it with extrapolating and totalizing "scientific" rigor' (Darko Suvin, 'On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre', *College English* 34: 3 (1972), p. 374).
14. See for example Suvin's own mention of the fairytale as escaping the empirical world 'into a closed collateral world indifferent toward cognitive possibilities' as part of his very definition of 'cognition', and his argument that '[a]nything is possible in a folktales, because a folktales is manifestly impossible' (*Metamorphoses*, pp. 6–8). Robert Conquest goes so far as to suggest that science fiction is not the best name for the field, and that "Possibility Fiction" might have been better' (Robert Conquest, 'Science Fiction and Literature', *The Critical Quarterly* V: iv (1963), p. 358).
15. Adam Roberts, *Science Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 8.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
17. Freedman, *Critical Theory*, p. 18; emphases in original.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
19. Cited in Miéville, 'Introduction', p. xvii.
20. Roberts, *Science Fiction*, p. 9.
21. Freedman, *Critical Theory*, p. 19.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
24. Cited in Miéville, 'Introduction', p. xvii.
25. Gwyneth Jones, *Deconstructing the Starships: Science, Fiction and Reality* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), p. 16; emphasis in original.
26. Indeed, that they would not is, according to Lewis, 'a merit not a defect', central to the text's success. C.S. Lewis, 'On Science Fiction', in *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories* (London: Harcourt, 1967), p. 64.
27. See Roger Luckhurst, *Science Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005).
28. Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, p. 63.
29. See John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).
30. Suvin, 'Considering the Sense of "Fantasy"', p. 214. This extended critique of 'impoverished pseudo-rationality' is one of the best sections of Suvin's 'effusion', though one of which the full implications are not fully fleshed out.
31. Jameson, *Archaeologies*, p. 57; my emphasis.
32. I have argued this in 'The Lies that aren't Meant to Deceive Us', available at www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php?articleidnumber=9870.
33. Freedman, *Critical Theory*, p. 17.
34. This argument is developed in China Miéville, 'Weird Fiction', in Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts and Sherry Vint, eds, *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2009).
35. According to Suvin, 'storytelling is a privileged cognitive method' and '[i]n my pantheon, narrative ... is one of the Supreme Goods' ('Considering the Sense of "Fantasy"', p. 233).
36. For the most important recent revisionist Marxist position, see Mark Bould, 'The Dreadful Credibility of Absurd Things: A Tendency in Fantasy Theory', *Historical Materialism* 10: 4 (2002), pp. 51–88.
37. The most productive avenues for research on this basis are probably those that relate the 'sensawunna' (as it has been derisively rendered) via the conceptual shift occasioned by its problematic of discordant *scale*, as John Clute has argued, to the tradition of the sublime (and perhaps, and perhaps concomitantly, with traditions of – often religious – ecstatic and visionary writing). *Scale* is an invaluable optic, predicated as it is on the uneasy familiarity of supposed

radical strangeness, rather than any truly fundamental break with any known. This is a topological translation of something I would consider key to the 'wonder' in the 'sense of wonder': precisely the necessary *failure* of alterity, the inevitable stains and traces of the everyday in whatever can be thought from within it, including its estranged/estranging other. Without such guilty stains, there could be no recognition or reception – true alterity would be inconceivable, thus imperceptible. We gasp not just at the strangeness but at the misplaced familiar within it. Class analysis here might include, among other projects: conceiving the (always-already failing) fantastic as a combined and uneven development of a conceived totality as reality and its rebuke; articulating the sublime and numinous as a misspoken emancipatory telos; a Benjaminian/Beckettian attempt to fail better and better at thinking an unthinkable.

APPENDICES

Left SF: Selected and Annotated, If Not Always Exactly Recommended, Works Mark Bould

These lists of recommended reading and viewing take a deliberately broad view of what constitutes left SF. Not all of the authors and directors listed below would call themselves leftists, and some works are not so much leftist as of interest to leftists. None are completely unproblematic and some are not very good at all.

1. Reading

Edward Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975). Eco-saboteurs take on colluding business and government. Sequel: *Hayduke Lives!* (1990). See also *Good Times* (1980).

Abe Kobo, *Inter Ice Age 4* (1959). The most overtly science-fictional of Abe's absurdist explorations of contemporary alienation. See also *Woman in the Dunes* (1962), *The Face of Another* (1964), *The Ruined Map* (1967), *The Box Man* (1973), *The Ark Sakura* (1984), *Beyond the Curve* (1991), *The Kangaroo Notebook* (1991).

Chingiz Aitmatov, *The Day Lasts Longer than a Hundred Years* (1980).

Surprisingly uncensored mediation of Central Asian tradition, Soviet modernity and the possibilities presented by an alien world.

Brian Aldiss, *HARM* (2007). A British muslim author, imprisoned and tortured for making a joke, hallucinates another – very resonant – world.

Benjamin Appel, *The Funhouse* (1959). Satire on commodity-hedonism and nuclear anxiety.

Eleanor Arnason, *A Woman of the Iron People* (1991). Post-revolutionary humans and humanoid aliens face the problems of interspecies communication and colonial encounter. See also *To the Resurrection Station* (1986), *Ring of Swords* (1993), *Ordinary People* (2005).

Brian Attebery and Ursula K. Le Guin, eds, *The Norton Book of Science Fiction* (1994). Notoriously 'unrepresentative' anthology of North American literary and feminist SF from 1960 to 1990.