GERRY CANAVAN AND ERIC CARL LINK

Introduction

This volume owes an obvious intellectual debt to Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James's earlier *Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, to which it serves as a kind of unofficial sequel. Indeed, the general excellence of that volume when set against the newly narrowed specificity of our title poses a certain inevitable question: Why develop a project devoted to *American* science fiction – interpreted in this volume primarily to mean U.S. fiction – in the first place? Why limit ourselves to SF from just one nation?

All literary forms are cross-cultural and transnational at some level, a fact that has never been truer than in the increasingly globalized literary world of the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries – the centuries during which SF developed, thrived, and ultimately came to dominate much of the cultural landscape of both the United States and the world. Indeed, the global interconnectedness of literary forms is, if anything, even more emblematic of SF than it is of other genres; SF – as a foundation for popular fandom, as an object of critical inquiry, as an interactive framework through which individuals engage their worlds and envision their collective futures – has never been easily bordered. Even on the level of SF's own favored themes, limiting our investigation to only American SF seems somehow distasteful, even perverse; SF's attitude toward the form of the nation-state has characteristically been quite hostile. No genre has offered more powerful examinations of the problems with cultural blindness and unchecked aggression toward the Other; no genre has more vividly impressed upon us the threats posed by non-global thinking, nationalism, and provincialism. From H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* and its many successors to Gene Roddenberry's cosmopolitan Federation to the rousing speech at the end of Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996), the very idea of the extraterrestrial seems to produce, in opposition, the vision of a single human race united together under a common flag. No less patriotic a soul than Ronald Reagan was frequently

carried away by such fantasies, as in his Address to the 42nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly:

> Cannot swords be turned to plowshares? Can we and all nations not live in peace? In our obsession with antagonisms of the moment, we often forget how much unites all the members of humanity. Perhaps we need some outside, universal threat to make us recognize this common bond. I occasionally think how quickly our differences worldwide would vanish if we were facing an alien threat from outside this world.[1]

Even in the absence of the fantasy of an alien threat, SF frequently produces expressly anti-nationalistic sentiments as a matter of course; in Ursula K. Le Guin's celebration of Soviet writer Yevgeny Zamyatin in the pages of *Science Fiction Studies* she even suggests this as the genre's highest distinction: "The intellectual crime for which Zamyatin was reviled and silenced was that of being an 'internal *émigré*.' (The American equivalent would be 'un-Americanism.') This smear-word is a precise and noble description of the finest writers of SF, in all countries."[2] The sublime tableau of the Earth as viewed from space – first imagined in such SF texts as Jules Verne's *Around the Moon* (1870), about American tinkerer-astronauts, a century before real-world technology caught up – demands that we see ourselves not as so many squabbling nations but as one species living together on this "pale blue dot." New technologies for communication and transportation uniformly serve to shrink the globe, disrupt artificial political boundaries, and make every news story simultaneously local and universal. As our increasingly immersive online experiences foretell – to say nothing of the transnational power of social media technologies, media piracy, and classified document leaks – our intellectual and cultural lives are already becoming globalized, even as the concept of the nation-state persists, at least for now. And when the apocalypse comes, as it does in so many SF texts, it is almost certain to be a worldwide phenomenon; neither nuclear fallout nor ecological disasters nor robot killers nor lurching zombies respect our carefully drawn political borders.

Despite all this, it remains overwhelmingly common both in and outside the academy to rely on the nation-state as a principle of inclusion and exclusion – to speak of the realist novel in its particular French manifestations in the early nineteenth century, in its Victorian British tradition, in its post-1865 American phase, and so on. Custom has made such divisions natural, and with language barriers and unique historical and cultural contexts to justify the divisions, this manner of categorization based in geopolitical realities and regional nationalism has become embedded in curriculums and hiring committees across the United States and beyond. One may critique the philosophy of the nation-state and illuminate in sophisticated ways the

hollowness and provincialism associated with nationalism, but the linguistic, historical, social, and aesthetic contexts in which Balzac wrote *La Comédie humaine* in France in the 1830s are notably different from the contexts in which Jane Austen wrote *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813 or William Dean Howells wrote *The Rise of Silas Lapham* in 1885. Thus national borders continue to frame both national literatures and the history of criticism that has sprung up around them. Even in a world made new by decolonization, the paradoxical result has been *more* reliance on the nation as a principle for mapping and understanding the world, not less.

This tension is alive in SF scholarship as well. Given the genre's origins and favored themes it is not surprising that none of the major scholarly journals devoted to SF criticism are nation-specific in their orientation. Classes devoted to introducing students to the critical analysis of SF hop from the England of H. G. Wells to the America of Octavia E. Butler to the Poland of Stanislaw Lem to the Russia of Arkady and Boris Strugatsky to the South Africa of Lauren Beukes with ease. Hollywood SF blockbusters match – and frequently surpass – their American receipts with their worldwide earnings, with international cooperation and coproduction not only increasingly common but also increasingly important in scripting, casting, and development. Shared interest in new developments in games, animation, and graphic novels with science fiction and fantasy themes has probably done more to bridge the cultural divide between Asia and the West among rising generations than decades of diplomacy ever did; the neon megacity of the post-1980s, post-cyberpunk future looks as much like Tokyo as it does New York or LA.

And yet the ongoing importance of the nation-state even within SF cannot be in dispute either. Wells's Martians attack where else but England, while Roddenberry's Federation is both overwhelmingly modeled on the postwar American state and commanded by a white male from Iowa; the *Enterprise* even retains the "U.S.S." prefix of the U.S. Navy. In Emmerich's alien invasion fantasy, Earth's "Independence Day" becomes (of course) July 4 – as grand an imperial takeover as one can fathom in that rousing speech made by a fictional American president who declares himself the representative of the entire globe. Nowhere is the ongoing relevance of the nation within SF clearer than in the renewed centrality of American superpower and the American military-industrial complex – its wars, its surveillance practices, its newly obvious fragility – as an object of both fantasy and terror in the post-9/11 cultural imaginary (the subject of Chapter 3 of this volume, "American Science Fiction after 9/11"). Superheroes sprung from the pages of mid-century American comics have new life fighting not communists but terrorists (the subject of Chapter 9, "U.S. Superpower and Superpowered

Americans in Science Fiction and Comic Books"), and have topped both the domestic and the global box office for most of the past decade. Not only in terms of its continued dominance of the global cultural industry, but also in terms of its outsized position as the world's largest economy, its largest military, and its largest polluter, the sheer gravitational mass of the United States continues to drive both utopian and dystopian speculation about the shape of the present and the prospects for the future.

The simple premise of the present volume, then, despite all of these caveats, is that the science fictional imagination is so fundamental to the arc of history across the so-called American Century that we might productively talk about a specifically *American* SF. Many of the ideas, themes, and conventions of contemporary science fiction take their roots in a distinctly American cultural experience, and so SF in America serves as a provocative index to twentieth- and twenty-first-century American culture, reflecting America's hopes, desires, ambitions, and fears. As Gary Westfahl has written previously, and elaborates on in Chapter 1 of this volume, "The Mightiest Machine":

> When [British and European science fiction critics] look at their native literatures in the period from 1890 to 1920, they find more than enough examples of works classifiable as science fiction that are far superior to anything produced in America at that time; but as they extend their chronological surveys past 1920, they watch their own traditions fade and fall apart, while American science fiction expands and grows stronger to the point that, by 1950, American writers and ideas dominated the world, and British and European authors were forced to imitate or respond to the American tradition.

Westfahl even finds Sweden's Sam J. Lundwall bemoaning that science fiction was "stolen" from Europe by the Americans![3] From film and television to music, genre fiction, comics, games, and canonical literature, the United States of the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries has embraced science fiction with open arms, less as a fantasy than as an electric anticipation of the world it was about to create. The American twentieth century was born in Edison's laboratories and Ford's factories, came into maturity with television, the atomic bomb, and the advent of digital computing, and finds us now, in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, talking about Ray Kurzweil's prognostications about a coming technological "Singularity" not as a playful metaphor but as a concrete prediction about what the future will be like. SF and U.S. culture in the past hundred years have been mutually informative spheres of influence, in which the predictive powers of SF have shaped real-world science and technology, which then spur further speculation. Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in the military, where the nuclear bomb, rockets, satellites, and drone warfare are all science fictional devices

that have been made real. "Science fiction is now a research and development department within a futures industry that dreams of the prediction and control of tomorrow," warns Afrofuturist scholar Kodwo Eshun,[4] in the same cultural moment that Homeland Security has begun bringing in science fiction writers to speculate on and anticipate possible threats to the nation. Likewise, the social impact of SF narratives can be felt across twentieth-century and twenty-first-century American history, from the triumph of the Apollo program to once unthinkable civil rights advances to the now ubiquitous usefulness of the Internet to genomic medicine to the apocalyptic anxieties that now drive contemporary environmentalist jeremiads. As much as, if not more than, any other literary genre in the United States since WWI and WWII, SF has mirrored – in both celebratory and critical ways – the evolution of postwar America itself. This volume is constructed around this proposition, providing a companion to Mendlesohn and James that charts the complex and intense relationship between science fiction, the American state, and American life.

At the same time, we hope the *Cambridge Companion to American Science Fiction* will intervene in science fiction studies by taking seriously Gary Westfahl's suggestion that mainline contemporary science fiction across the globe in fact bears a specifically American stamp. The very term "science fiction," after all, was coined in the United States in 1929 by Hugo Gernsback, founding editor of *Amazing Stories* – and it was in American pulp magazines of the 1920s and 1930s that science fiction first coalesced as a distinct and recognizable literary genre. Indeed, our chosen focus on American science fiction directs us to question even the force of that qualifying "literary," as books are rarely the most popular delivery system for these ideas; the middle section of this volume is correspondently dedicated to media (as opposed to strictly literary) criticism, with essays dedicated to the importance of Hollywood film and television, comic books, game culture, and science fiction fan culture alongside the prose novel. This expanded focus is fitting for a companion dedicated to American SF, as America's mass culture industry (above and beyond its book publishing arm) has been and remains by far the largest distributor and popularizer of science fictional speculations in the world. The vast canon to which all contemporary creators of SF (in all media, forms, and genres) respond is thus (for better and for worse) tightly linked to American ideas, experiences, cultural assumptions, and entertainment markets, as well as to distinctly American visions of what the future might be like.

The story of SF in the United States does not begin with the pulps of the 1920s, but all the same the United States does not boast any SF authors in

the nineteenth century who can match in popularity and influence Mary Shelley, H. G. Wells, or Jules Verne. Having said that, the American nineteenth century was not devoid of SF – even if it was not thought of as SF at the time, and perhaps still isn't – and, more importantly, nineteenth-century American literature exhibits the kind of keen and sustained interest in cutting-edge developments in science and technology that is reflected in American SF from the Golden Age forward.

As with any literary type, identifying the first example of a new thing is an exercise in futility. Long narrative prose fiction in the United States did not take root until the early national period, and to the extent that the European (principally English) Gothic novel paved the way for the emergence of SF in Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and beyond, one can make a similar claim for the influence of the Gothic on U.S. literature. As important as the Gothic tradition was to the emergence of SF, so, too, were the fantastic voyage narratives of Francis Godwin, Cyrano de Bergerac, and Jacques Guttin, the long tradition of utopian speculation launched by Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), the satiric narratives of Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift, the *contes philosophiques* of Voltaire and others, and the Enlightenment itself, which turned the attention of the academy toward scientific methodologies and experimentation.

In the first half of the nineteenth century in American letters, one finds a variety of texts that prefigure SF and wear their literary influences on their sleeves. In 1820, *Symzonia; Voyage of Discovery* by "Captain Adam Seaborn" (perhaps either John Cleves Symmes or Nathaniel Ames) took the Hollow Earth theory trumpeted by Symmes on the lecture circuit and extrapolated a fantastic voyage into the crust of the Earth, and into a utopian community where a wondrous society and strange technologies abound. In 1827, George Tucker published *A Voyage to the Moon*, arguably the first U.S. novel to feature extraplanetary travel, which builds on the satiric traditions of Jonathan Swift and borrows some narrative framework from Francis Godwin and other writers in the moon-centric fantastic voyage tradition. Meanwhile, the Gothic influence predominates in the SF tales of Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Of these two, Poe's influence on later SF is much more pronounced. Several of his Gothic tales prefigure major developments in SF, with the tale of "Mellonta Tauta" (1849) set in the year 2848; his own peculiar and elusive take on the Hollow Earth theory of John Cleves Symmes and *Symzonia* in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838); his weird tales of mesmerism such as "Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (1845); his own satiric take on the "fantastic voyage to the moon" tradition, "The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall" (1835); and his cosmic and philosophical speculations in *Eureka* (1848). At the same

time, although not as influential in the history of SF as the works of Poe, Hawthorne's stories "The Artist of the Beautiful" (1844), "The Birthmark" (1843), and "Rappaccini's Daughter" (1844), among others, are all centrally concerned in one way or another with scientific extrapolation and a reexamination of the human condition as a result of the impact of scientific developments on culture, society, and individual human relationships.

In more ways than one, the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) proved a turning point in the emergence of SF in U.S. letters. Indeed, viewing Darwin's *Origin* as a kind of pivot point, one can observe three major developments in the late nineteenth century that set the stage for SF in the twentieth century. The first of these developments – considered in more detail in Mark Bould's contribution to this volume – was the rise of a strong and influential tradition in utopian thinking in the late nineteenth century, spearheaded by Edward Bellamy's paradigm-defining *Looking Backward* (1888) and including such a wide-ranging group of texts as William Dean Howell's *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), as well as John McCoy's *A Prophetic Romance* (1896) and Alice Jones and Ella Merchant's *Unveiling a Parallel: A Romance* (1893), both of which feature either receiving a visitor from Mars (McCoy) or a traveler to Mars (Jones and Merchant). Bellamy's book also ignited a fierce anti-utopian backlash in such works as Richard C. Michaelis's pro-capitalist *Looking Further Forward* (1890), J. W. Roberts's anti-utopian *Looking Within* (1893), and Arthur Dudley Vinton's racist Yellow Peril narrative *Looking Further Backward* (1890).

The second development was the emergence – particularly evidenced in young adult fiction – of what has since been dubbed the Edisonade: tales of remarkable applied science in which inventors (often boy geniuses) use their technological facility to save the day and win acclaim. The pattern was established, in many ways, by Edward S. Ellis's *The Steam Man of the Prairies* (1868), and continued through the several Frank Reade stories by Harold Cohen and continued as the adventures of Frank Reade Jr. in a long series of stories by Luis Senarens, who also penned the long series of "boy inventor" tales starring Jack Wright in the 1890s. Frank Baum would make his own contribution – of a sort – to the "boy hero" tradition of young adult fiction with his *The Master Key* (1901). Such stories characteristically linked invention to war machines; this connection may be no clearer than in Garrett P. Serviss's quasi-sequel to Wells's *War of the Worlds, Edison's Conquest of Mars*, in which *Thomas Edison himself* leads Earth's successful counterattack against the Martians.

The third development was the rise of literary naturalism in the late nineteenth century. Although rarely discussed in literary histories as a precursor

to twentieth-century SF, literary naturalism was a remarkably important step along the road to the Golden Age. Strongly influenced by post-Darwinian developments in the biological sciences and intrigued by emergent theories of human nature in the late nineteenth century, the literary naturalists were central figures in the merging of scientific thought and fictional narrative. Among this group (which includes Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and Stephen Crane), Jack London stands out, for among his vast canon are a number of works that are unmistakably SF and point toward twentieth-century SF more directly than the satiric fantasies, utopian dreams, and weirdly Gothic tales that preceded them in the nineteenth century. From the dystopian visions of *The Iron Heel* (1907) to an array of tales such as "The Unparalleled Invasion" (1910), "War" (1911), "The Red One" (1918), "Goliah" (1908), "The Scarlet Plague" (1912), and a dozen more, London helped pave the way in American letters for idea-rich SF throughout the twentieth century.

Participating in and around these three principal developments in late nineteenth-century American literary history are a handful of other SF texts that helped set the stage for what was to emerge after WWI. These include Fitz-James O'Brien's "The Diamond Lens" (1858) and "The Wonder Smith" (1859), various efforts by Ambrose Bierce, Edward Everett Hale's "The Brick Moon" (1869) and "Hands Off!" (1881), John A. Mitchell's *The Last American* (1889), as well as Frank Stockton's "The Water Devil" (1871) and "A Tale of Negative Gravity" (1884). Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) is a brilliant time-travel fantasy that satirizes utopian idealism and the "inventor saves the day" trope that would soon become the ur-plot of dozens of Edisonades. The Hollow Earth fantasy comes back into vogue with John Uri Lloyd's *Etidorpha* (1895) and Willis George Emerson's *The Smokey God* (1908), and the fantastic-voyage-meets-interplanetary-romance tradition remains alive and well in Gustavus Pope's *Journey to Mars* (1894) and *Journey to Venus* (1895). Capitalizing on the fame of H. G. Wells and Thomas Edison, Garrett P. Serviss published *Edison's Conquest of Mars* in 1898, and followed that up with another SF novel, *The Sky Pirate*, in 1909. By the second decade of the twentieth century, Hugo Gernsback himself had entered the scene with his *Ralph 124C 41+* (1911), and Edgar Rice Burroughs had launched his Barsoom series with *A Princess of Mars* (1917). In 1926 Hugo Gernsback founded *Amazing Stories*, and the age of the SF pulps in the United States had begun.

In one sense, the boom in American SF in the first half of the twentieth century (which in turn would structure so much of the form of SF in the second half of the century) had a certain inevitability to it. The convergence in the

second half of the nineteenth century of several aspects of U.S. culture – the real and imagined idea of the great American frontier, the techno-centric entrepreneurial drive of Edison and others, the fascination the literary naturalists and utopian writers had with the leading edge of scientific exploration – seemed to call for a modernist literature that would push these interests to their logical conclusions. Of all of the distinctive themes that one might call *American*, none stands out more prominently as a calling card of U.S. identity than the myth of the frontier. With the official closing of the American frontier with the census of 1890, the stage was set for Frederick Jackson Turner's celebrated frontier thesis in 1893 – and the quest to reclaim lost frontiers through re-imaginings quickly followed. The opening words of every original-run *Star Trek* episode – the unmistakable "Space – the Final Frontier" – strike a distinctively American chord. "So powerful was the myth of the West as a place where the future was to be found and made, however," notes Brian Stableford in the *Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, "that American Vernian fiction soon began to outstrip the ambitions of European Vernians. Writers like Frank R. Stockton, in *The Great War Syndicate* (1889) and *The Great Stone of Sardis* (1898), and Garrett P. Serviss, in *The Moon Metal* (1900) and *A Columbus of Space* (1909), helped pave the way for the development of popular SF of a distinctively American kind."[5]

The paradigmatically American space of the frontier unites the two strategies of critique that have tended to dominate SF scholarship in the academy. The utopian valence of the frontier calls to mind the critical interventions of such theorists of SF as Fredric Jameson (*Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* [2005]) and Darko Suvin ("On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre" [1972], expanded into *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* [1979]), whose work sought to legitimize science fiction and science fiction studies through association with forward-looking socialist politics. In the hands of such thinkers, SF is essentially about utopian speculation, either through the positive construction of utopian blueprints or, more commonly in the American tradition, the negative depiction of the wretched dystopias that will arise "if this goes on." The frontier (now relocated to outer space) becomes an archetypal space of hope where humanity might start over with a clean slate, with examples from Isaac Asimov, Frank Herbert, Gene Roddenberry, and Robert Heinlein to Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler, Philip K. Dick, Kim Stanley Robinson, and others far too numerous to enumerate here.

The other major strain of contemporary SF scholarship, exemplified by such thinkers as John Rieder (*Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*), Istvan Csicsery-Ronay ("Science Fiction and Empire"), and Patricia

Kerslake (*Science Fiction and Empire*), finds SF more concerned with the production of death than with utopia. But the space of the frontier is no less critically vital for this shift in perspective; here the frontier is less a space of hope than a proof of the inevitability of war, as seen in the perpetual popularity of military SF and "space empire" fantasies. Csicsery-Ronay calls particular attention to those "fantasies of physical mastery and engineering know-how" that continue to drive so much science fiction as part and parcel of the way imperialism "facilitated the subjugation of less developed cultures, wove converging networks of technical administration, and established standards of 'objective measurement' that led inevitably to myths of racial and national supremacy."[6] Rieder, too, who writes the chapter on the frontier for the third section of this volume, finds in most SF the expression of a "colonial gaze"[7] that distributes power unevenly between the one that looks and the one that is looked at; from this perspective the paradigmatic SF of the frontier might not be the bustling space colony but rather the unblinking eye of the military spy satellite. In our time the myth of the frontier has accordingly turned sour, calling to mind not renewal or rebirth but the hair-trigger violence of postapocalyptic zombie fictions: used up, exhausted, already dead.

The Venn intersection between these two critical perspectives drives much of the analysis in *The Cambridge Companion to American Science Fiction*: utopia versus empire, optimism versus pessimism, progress versus regress, hope versus despair. Since WWI science fiction has been the genre of choice for authors who wanted the narrative freedom to explore new ideas and new philosophies in compelling, challenging, and provocative ways, as well as to talk back against the trends of contemporary culture. During this period – the so-called American century – SF has served as an important pop cultural medium for the exchange of such ideas in the United States and beyond, particularly with respect to the growing influence of science and technology on the way we think about the human condition (as Priscilla Wald discusses at length in Chapter 13). SF has also – as an intellectual and artistic endeavor – been a major source of socioeconomic, political, and cultural critique, providing creative and provocative outlets for ongoing countercultural interventions that have served as a running commentary on the world of the future as we recognize it emerging in the present. This work of the imagination seems only more urgent today. With neural interface devices, strong artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and molecular assemblers all in various stages of research and development in U.S. laboratories, and a shrinking world in which the U.S. military-industrial complex still reflects elements of Manifest Destiny, the Monroe Doctrine, and lingering and evolving Cold War geopolitics, and the cascading series of interrelated ecological