

## *Introduction*

*Suicide and Contemporary Science Fiction* explores a fascination with suicidal crises evident in a range of science fiction, including a number of the genre's most celebrated examples. Examining this thematic genealogy, the study presents a seemingly counterintuitive proposition: the artists frequently cast self-destructive episodes as catalysts for beneficial change. It may seem odd that something as traumatic as a suicidal crisis, even in a fictional representation, could serve as a model for productive adaptation, but the texts examined here are in fact quite forceful in this regard. In broad terms, this fascination with suicidal "rebooting" may be traced back to the traumatic birth of modern science. By upending the scholastic paradigm that preceded it, scientific method appeared to challenge, if not destroy, sources of long-established religious meaning.<sup>1</sup> As Mark Rose has argued in *Alien Encounters*, science fiction evolved to mediate this shift, negotiating a fundamental tension in modern culture between material and spiritual concerns (47). René Descartes and Sir Isaac Newton might dissect the rainbow, making profound mathematical and optical advances in the process, but discoveries of this sort would always have a price, or so insisted observers such as John Keats, who greeted the scientific discoveries regarding the rainbow, formerly a sign of God's covenant with humanity, as a kind of deicide.<sup>2</sup> Broad traumas associated with subsequent scientific revolutions extend these dynamics beyond science's origins (e.g., to Darwin's theory of evolution, the arrival of the nuclear age, the conquest of space, prospects of bioengineered terrorism, the possibility of human obsolescence in an era of artificial intelligence).

This continuing precariousness brings to the fore an important aspect of the cultural work undertaken by science fiction: its speculative mediation of profound upheaval. For science fiction, such crises (realized or anticipated) have been both deeply disturbing and distinctly energizing: this tension helps explain the genre's seemingly paradoxical fascination with "productive" suicidal crises. Scientific revolutions of the sort noted prompt speculative models of change that frequently emphasize extreme remaking rather than deliberate and sustained adapting: utopian/dystopian leaps rather than gradual reforms. As well, many of the artists examined convey an urgency fed by indications that scientific and technological change is accelerating at a remarkable rate. Such is especially evident in the more contemporary works, which register the exponential growth of computing power since the 1970s; however, the notion that advances in science and technology might be wildly outstripping humanity's readiness to adapt to them (intellectually, ethically, biologically, spiritually) has been apparent right from the start of the genre, here associated with the "scientific romances" of H. G. Wells and his cohort.<sup>3</sup>

*Suicide and Contemporary Science Fiction* gives priority to studying the primary works engaged in their specific historical contexts of perceived crisis: *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and Victorian anxieties regarding Darwin's theory; *Solaris* and the prospect of nuclear self-destruction at the dawn of the space age; *Neuromancer* and the development of artificial intelligence; *Inception* and the cybernetic colonization of the unconscious; *Looper* and a neoliberal rush to corporate rule, inspired by and dependent on violent gaming; and finally the *Maddaddam* trilogy in the context of impending ecological disaster and the rise of bio-terrorism. Building from these particular circumstances, each chapter functions as a case study. Taken together, these chapters capture paradoxical fascinations with, and anxieties about, changes presented as though they existed beyond individual control; frequently, the artists depict these changes in a fashion that requires the central characters to "reboot" themselves in order to survive, or to remain relevant, in a radically altered environment. Crucially, the artists offer central characters who are

notable for the ways in which they are fundamentally stuck in particular habits of thought, in patterns that are themselves destructive (to the characters in question, to other humans, to the environment, or to wonder as a sustaining human activity). In most cases, these characters significantly alter or break their attachments to these habits of thought while going through their suicidal crises. The most obvious analogy might be to an addict “bottoming out” in order to begin an otherwise impossible recovery. That such an analogy is appropriate when considering these works speaks volumes about the tenacity of the habits of thought that require surmounting, and the artists’ assessments of them.

As much as the artists examined in the study employ speculative fiction to look “forward” or “elsewhere,” they are also deeply motivated by historical inquiry and analysis. Although it is often necessary for the audience of these works to draw out subtle or implicit references of this nature, the historical aspects of the works define loaded contexts that in turn strategically shed light on the specific habits of thought targeted by the artists. In this manner, the historical aspects of these texts reveal a great deal about the “addictions” that propel the “bottoming out,” or suicidal crises, represented. For many of the artists examined in this study (Octavia Butler, Stanislaw Lem, William Gibson, Christopher Nolan, and Rian Johnson), something like a regeneration through self-directed violence facilitates new cognitive and affective vistas, thereby allowing new modes of thinking, feeling, and imagination. In these cases, the disruption of identity associated with suicidal breakdown signals an opportunity to rebuild in radical fashion, and to the extent that this reconstruction is shaped by a critical awareness of previous destructive habits (e.g., blinding anthropomorphism, narcissism, damaging sublimations of grief), it grounds what the artists present as a “beneficial” turn, even if such entails only greater self-awareness. In some cases, this renewal is far more tentative (H. G. Wells’ *The Island of Doctor Moreau*), while in other instances (Margaret Atwood’s *Maddaddam* trilogy), the model of “regenerative” suicidal change is itself subject to fundamental critique as enacting a repetition of the very habits it purports to rethink. Whatever assessment of

the suicidal transformation model is finally invited by the specific works, they all bear witness to the attraction this mechanism holds over the social imaginaries they depict.

It is difficult to say exactly why this topic has not received more critical attention in the criticism devoted to the fiction and film examined here, especially given how strongly the suicide theme imposes itself. In general, suicide as a research topic tends to present distinct difficulties attached to the moral, spiritual, and political anxieties it produces. Georges Minois emphasizes this point in *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture*, a comprehensive analysis of the complicated factors influencing understandings of suicide. As Minois notes, the fraught response to suicide has frequently left researchers struggling to find scholarly consensus about even the most basic terminology and concepts. Although suicide has received considerable research attention since Emile Durkheim's landmark 1897 study on the topic, definitions of the term itself have been regularly contested, a situation that reflects ongoing methodological struggles.<sup>4</sup> As Minois demonstrates, these methodological struggles cannot be separated from the philosophical, religious, moral, and cultural implications attached to voluntary death. Along these lines, Minois' expansive study provides considerable evidence of the social reprobation that has frequently been directed toward suicides (self-harm frequently taken as an affront to God and government alike), and he suggests that the silence and dissimulation surrounding the topic present challenges for which cultural criticism is well suited. Tracking a good deal of variation regarding how Western societies have viewed suicide over time, Minois notes that the term effectively displaced "self-murder" during the Enlightenment, a shift that softened this reprobation to a degree. Although Minois finds a new candor about the question of suicide in the modern period (a shift epitomized by Shakespeare's "To be, or not to be"), continuing anxieties regarding suicide help account for ongoing methodological debates.

For the purposes of the study at hand, suicidal crises are understood as behaviors with implicit or explicit suicidal intent (behavior that is self-directed and deliberately results in injury to oneself), or as

ideation regarding such action. This definition of suicidal self-harm was presented in 2011 by the Centers for Disease Control in an effort to improve the reporting and study of suicidal behavior.<sup>7</sup> Two aspects of the CDC's revision of terminology deserve particular attention. First, the CDC's definitions are distinguished by their focus on intent. Specifically, suicidal self-directed violence includes activity that results in, or *holds the potential for*, injury; by recognizing both suicidal behavior and ideation, the report gives special weight to intent. The ultimate physical effect of a behavior has been displaced as a defining feature. Second, the language used to define aspects of suicidal behavior has been reformulated to downplay perceived judgments regarding intent. Use of "failed," "successful," and even "completed" suicides is explicitly criticized by the CDC report, as such may confer values undermining treatment. In sum, the CDC's revisions reflect an effort to both recognize and address intent, a shift in keeping with the culturally nuanced approach to the topic advocated by Minois. Inasmuch as intent evolves in a cultural context, suicidal crises are likely to resonate in ways that are both individual and collective.

Although the general underdevelopment of suicide as critical focus tends to carry over to the scholarship produced thus far regarding the fiction and film examined in this study, many important trends in science fiction criticism set the stage for the readings pursued in the following pages. Although this study cannot offer a comprehensive engagement with, let alone overview of, this criticism, which is varied, rich, and expansive, invoking some selective examples will demonstrate how the interpretations developed here have been built on influential theories and analyses of science fiction.

A landmark study, Darko Suvin's *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* provided one of the first rigorous theories of the genre, a Marxist-inflected view that defines science fiction as a literature of "cognitive estrangement" (4). Tracing science fiction's roots back to utopian writing, Suvin locates in the genre a fundamental tension between imagined worlds and the worlds inhabited by the artists and their audiences (13–14). For Suvin, the particular nature of this ontological tension defines the genre: readers and viewers should

be able to “reverse engineer” the “real” world of the artist and/or audience from the imagined (estranged) world, and this reverse engineering effort should rely on the accepted scientific and technological possibilities of the existing world. In other words, science fiction imagines change, and specifically developments that approximate what might seem realistic (according to science and technology) given the known starting point of the artist’s/audience’s world. Suvin’s theory has come under fire for the way it too steadfastly polices the boundary between fantasy and science fiction (what seems like realistic possibility and what does not), but it nonetheless continues to provide a central organizing principle for many scholars of the field.<sup>6</sup> In this regard, science fiction is deeply invested not simply in imagining change, but also in assessing hypothetical and historically informed models of change (e.g., Atwood’s Gilead in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, a dystopian society whose practices are almost wholly drawn from historical precedents).<sup>7</sup>

Science fiction scholarship extends well beyond Suvin’s particular sociological and Marxist-oriented contribution, recently exploring, for example, aesthetically reframed cognitive considerations (Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr.’s *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*), but even so, the dominant critical tendency has taken the investment in change as a core artistic concern. Even when the roots of science fiction are traced to different sources, for example romance literature (Mark Rose’s *Alien Encounters*), the emphasis remains relatively consistent: science fiction “challenges our sense of the stability of reality by insisting upon the contingency of the present order of things. Indeed, science fiction not only asserts that things may be different; as a genre it insists that they will and must be different, that change is the only constant rule and that the future will not be like the present” (Rose, 21). As the genre’s name indicates, it is deeply invested in the kinds of change derived from the discoveries, methods, and implications (social, material, metaphysical) of science. The plausibility vouchsafed by science supplies the “cognitive” aspect of Suvin’s definition (the foundation for the plausible reverse engineering), but more importantly, science as a motor for change hails the genre into being and feeds its extension.<sup>8</sup>

The economist Joseph Schumpeter tapped this scientific motor when he recast capitalism as an evolutionary enterprise, in the process popularizing the phrase perhaps inevitably recalled by this study: “creative destruction.”<sup>9</sup> However, even though Schumpeter’s use of the term presents a rough analogue for creative self-destruction (in his version innovative productivity is unleashed as economic orders and existing wealth are essentially destroyed and supplanted by new iterations), his relative confinement to economic considerations produces a tunnel vision: “creative destruction” fails to engage its debt to evolutionary theory, including the tensions between spiritual and material concerns animated by Darwin’s writings. In particular, the concept of “creative destruction” fails to account for the baggage that accompanies the quasi-utopian, cataclysmic model of change it envisions; this baggage includes a tendency toward historical amnesia and the legitimization of violence posed as regenerative innovation.<sup>10</sup> Creative self-destruction, as an alternative concept, is more nuanced in part because it does not turn a blind eye to the costs of change, especially the traumas entailed when certain forms of radical adaptation are promoted at the sacrifice of alternative modes of change. Literature proves an especially well-suited venue for examining such costs because, as Mikhail Bakhtin argued, the best literature critically reanimates all manner of institutional discourses in hypothetical situations that mimic lived experience, and in this way literature may model and analyze how dynamic forms of understanding are constructed within a field of options.<sup>11</sup>

To help clarify the appeal of the creative self-destruction approach to the artists examined in this study, I offer a brief case study of Octavia Butler’s “Bloodchild,” a work whose conflicted critical reception reinforces the importance of coming to terms with the suicidal crisis at its heart. Butler’s oeuvre has won widespread recognition for its subtle exploration of intertwined social, political, and psychological dynamics, including conflicts carrying the weight of traumatic historical legacies (e.g., slavery, warfare, colonization); faced with such challenges, a number of her more prominent characters wrestle with suicide, and in these representations one finds an

extended and thoughtful consideration of creative self-destruction. Although many of these characters choose to survive, Butler conveys a complexity associated with these decisions, one that frequently poses suicidal crisis as a transformative experience.<sup>12</sup>

### “Bloodchild”

Winner of both Nebula and Hugo awards (in 1984 and 1985, respectively), Butler’s short story “Bloodchild” illustrates this “rebooting” process, and particularly the ways it has been associated with challenging destructive habits of thought. Set in a distant future, the story presents a cohort of humans (Terrans) who have escaped enslavement on a distant Earth only to find themselves of necessity drawn into a symbiotic relationship with a species native to their new world: the insectlike Tlic. Maintaining a society resembling what one might find on Earth, the Tlic are most prominently distinguished biologically, and especially by their insectlike need to implant their eggs in hosts. Prior to the arrival of the Terrans, the Tlic had depended on native host animals, but these developed a resistance to the Tlic’s reproductive process, a situation that threatened the Tlic with decline, if not extinction. Early contact among the Terrans and the Tlic was intimate, if not consensual, because the Terrans proved to be ideal hosts, producing healthier larvae and adult Tlic; the Terrans also demonstrated an ability to repeat the process multiple times. These early encounters were also strongly shaped by the collective traumas carried by both populations. Fearful of their reproductive vulnerability, the Tlic initially treated the Terrans like livestock, thereby reproducing many aspects of the Earthly slavery that had forced the Terrans into exile.

Although the principal action of the story is set at some remove from the initial conflicts between Tlic and Terrans, it is close enough in time and memory that the principal characters fear a return to this past. As a result, the characters carry an awareness that current struggles may revive the earlier violence. In the story’s present, “progressive” social engineering is supplanting the neo-slavery initially imposed by the Tlic on the Terrans. To this end, a segment



of the Tlic government is charged with protecting the Terrans, and with merging Terran and Tlic families, with the ultimate goal of sustaining a symbiotic relationship among independent and consenting partners. For this transitional period, the Terrans are restricted by the Tlic government to a preserve, ostensibly to protect them from the previous forms of reproductive slavery. As part of the preserve arrangement, Terrans are (apparently ineffectively) banned from possessing guns, which had afforded some limited ability to fight their earlier livestock status.

The preserve setting, and the Tlic's dissemination of sedating foods, convince some interpreters of the story that the initial Tlic slavery of the Terrans is anything but a thing of the past; for example, Elyce Rae Helford finds in the social engineering a recycling of many techniques essential to Earth-bound slavery.<sup>13</sup> In an afterword published with the story in 2005, Butler takes issue with such analyses, instead calling this a story about "paying the rent," coming of age, and male pregnancy (30–32). In her view, it is foremost a love story. If one accepts Butler's intervention in the critical reception of the story, a different sort of question asserts itself: why would she construct a tale of symbiosis and love in a manner that seems so inclined to invite associations with slavery? And what seemingly miraculous mechanism might account for the transcendence achieved, however fragile this utopian victory might be?

The central character of "Bloodchild," a Terran named Gan, wrestles precisely with concerns one might infer from Butler's view of the story. Although he is just entering adulthood, Gan has been prepared for impregnation by a life-long Tlic partner. His perhaps too easy acceptance of his role as future host is deeply challenged when he encounters a "birthing" gone wrong: one subverted by disease, but also by the Terran host's fear. Witnessing the ultimately successful but extremely painful cesarean-like birth, Gan confronts the alien-ness of something that he thought he understood and embraced. In addition, Gan's anxieties are fed by his mother's misgivings (she is angry with herself because she cannot escape the feeling she has bartered her son for the benefits of Tlic protection) and by his brother's eagerness to avoid Gan's fate at all costs. This

brother, Qui, is so determined in this regard that he effectively destroys himself in all but a physical sense.

Despite being horrified by what he witnesses, Gan plays a crucial role in saving the endangered Terran host during the birthing scene – Gan uses a hidden family gun to kill and thereby provide a transitional host animal – but the episode disturbs Gan so profoundly that he subsequently turns the same gun on himself during a climactic confrontation with his Tlic partner, T’Gatoi. Crucially, this crisis is marked by Butler as facilitating a fresh self-examination of Gan’s intentions, a form of reflection distinguished by a new sense of critical distance. When Gan takes up the rifle just before his crisis, he assumes that he is doing so in order to clean and oil the weapon before returning it to its hiding spot. Instead, he loads the gun as if he were watching someone else undertake the action. The move toward suicide is therefore marked by a self-consciousness about conflicted intentions and mental processing. When T’Gatoi stumbles upon Gan holding the weapon, Gan puts the barrel under his own chin. Gan knows that there is another in his family who could willingly serve as a host, Gan’s older sister, Xuan Hoa, so more appears to be involved in the suicidal gesture than self-interest. As if to confirm this point, Gan has a confrontation with his brother immediately before the suicidal episode. During this exchange, Qui explicitly reveals his foremost concern: to avoid being a host at any cost, even if doing so requires sacrificing his siblings. Gan reacts to Qui’s unbridled self-interest as if Qui is being paranoid, since it is highly unlikely that Qui would be forced to host given his sister’s willingness to assume the role. However absurd Qui may seem, his behavior confirms for Gan that using his sister as a shield (as Qui would use either of his siblings) would have its own great cost.

This framing of Gan’s suicidal gesture – the critical appraisal invited by Qui’s refusal to pay the rent – suggests that Gan sees no hope of escaping a vulnerability that engulfs his family, and the Terrans as a whole. A great deal turns on how one reads this hope of escape. If one follows Helford in emphasizing those aspects of the story that invite comparisons to slavery (the Terrans being corralled like livestock into a preserve) the scene might be said to evoke one of