

SUICIDE AND CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE FICTION

Suicide and Contemporary Science Fiction examines the fascination with suicidal crises evident in a range of science fiction. Specifically, this study explores a seemingly counterintuitive proposition: in moments of dramatic scientific and technological change, the authors of these works frequently cast self-destructive episodes as catalysts for beneficial change. Carlos Gutiérrez-Jones argues that this creative self-destruction mechanism is invoked by H. G. Wells as a means of negotiating Victorian anxieties regarding evolutionary theory, by Stanislaw Lem as he wrestles with the prospect of nuclear self-destruction at the dawn of the space age, by William Gibson as he considers the development of artificial intelligence, by Christopher Nolan as he explores the cybernetic colonization of the unconscious, by Rian Johnson as he links aspects of video gaming to the neoliberal militarization of institutions, and by Margaret Atwood as she considers impending ecological disaster and the rise of bioterrorism. These authors often depict such scientific and technological changes in a fashion that requires the central characters to transform themselves in hopes of remaining relevant in a radically altered environment.

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For my uncle, James S. Coleman

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Acknowledgments

This project grew directly from classroom discussions, and with these origins in mind, I thank my students for their engaged readings of the literature and study of the films, their consistent willingness to climb out on limbs, and their patience as they negotiated my evolving obsession with the themes explored in this book. I inherited my department's science fiction class eight years ago; in fact, my department chair at the time, William Warner, had to do some gentle arm-twisting because taking on the course was a bit of a departure for me. I had grown up greatly enjoying science fiction, but I had not previously dived into the wealth of critical work devoted to the genre. I will be forever grateful to Bill for giving me the push because the years I have been teaching this course have been enormously rewarding. In part, this is because the materials are tremendously rich; in part, it is because the students who take the science fiction course are diverse in terms of their fields of study and often deeply committed to the questions driving science fiction. When these students came to class, they were motivated in a way that was unique. I hope that the book in hand conveys the excitement and energy of those many classroom and office hour conversations.

Heading in a new direction with one's research can be nerve-racking as well as energizing, and I would not have gotten far with the venture were it not for the generosity of many knowledgeable colleagues, especially those involved in the conferences and events sponsored by the Science Fiction Research Association. Every chapter in this book has been shaped in some significant way by the responses, suggestions, and questions offered by the panel

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Although I ended up an English major in college (much to my parents' horror, which did not abate until I received tenure), I started my academic journey squarely in the sciences. I was very fortunate to have a number of inspiring teachers who took those extra precious minutes in any given day to offer encouragement, or to find the one special book that they knew I would love. Of these friends, I would single out a mentor who took me under his wing as part of a summer science outreach program at UC Davis: Professor Richard Falk. To this day, I cannot imagine what inspired him to turn a sixteen-year-old loose with a scanning electron microscope (in the late 1970s, this half-million dollar machine took up an entire room and had more than a few fragile parts). Whether it was wise or not, the faith he showed had a remarkable impact on me. Among other things, he taught me to dream big. He also passed along his abiding love of science, as well as a sense of wonder that I like to believe returns in the pages of this book.

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As noted, a version of my chapter on William Gibson's novel appeared originally as a journal article: "Stealing Kinship:

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