



On Not Defining Science Fiction: An Introduction

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The very idea of assembling a history of science fiction suggests a fundamental question: of what, exactly, is this a history? In one sense, the history of science fiction is the history of something that still feels relatively new. Not as new as some things – postmodernism, for instance, or the Internet – but certainly newer than many other topics that warrant enshrining between the boards of a Cambridge History. In another sense, however, one might suggest that humans have engaged with science fiction for centuries. Science fiction, in one form or another, is something artists have seemingly always participated in, but which was named less than a century ago, and thus it is an aesthetic with a chrome sheen of newness, and long and complicated trails of glory that extend back into the annals of artistic expression to Mary Shelley, or Thomas More, or even as far back as the ancient epic, depending on one's critical vantage point. This tension between science fiction's relative newness and the complicated network of definitions of the science fiction aesthetic that have managed to push debates over the origin of the category back to Gilgamesh and the Book of Genesis will receive no particular special pleading here: histories of artistic categories almost all share the difficulty of setting definitional borders. Yes, science fiction, like anything else, has its own set of nuances and particularities, but the debates engendered by such nuances are not so different from the debates that have ensued over the definition of romanticism or postmodernism or "the medieval" or "Europe" or any of several dozen other aesthetic categories of varying size, shape, and global impact.

In keeping with romanticism, postmodernism, and other complicated genres, movements, and aesthetic categories, the origin story of science fiction has been told and retold more times than DC Comics has reinvented the origin of Wonder Woman. It sometimes seems that science fiction has as many proposed origin points as it has critics. Do we begin with Hugo Gernsback, whose editorial and curatorial work in the American pulp

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magazines of the 1920s and 1930s helped crystallize science fiction as a recognizable and distinct literary genre? Do we begin with H. G. Wells – who introduced some of the best-loved tropes of the genre, like alien invasion and time travel – or go still further back, to Jules Verne, or to Edgar Allan Poe, or to Mary Shelley? Can we ignore the flying cities and horse civilizations of Jonathan Swift as proto-science fictions, which (like our own contemporary versions) satirically presented our own foibles and illusions to us as if for the first time? In his 1979 *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, Darko Suvin, one of the key figures in the initial establishment of science fiction studies as an academic discipline,¹ posits More's *Utopia* as the starting point for science fiction and utopian writing both – though Suvin elsewhere suggests that perhaps the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Tower of Babel, the Book of Revelation, and the Garden of Eden could all themselves be thought of as proto-science-fictions too, at least from a certain point of view. Perhaps “science fiction” is only the latest iteration of some larger tendency of the human imagination that in some sense truly is innate and transhistorical.

Wherever one begins, it is clear that the story of science fiction is transnational and transmedia, cutting across the easy and well-policed boundary lines that typically structure academic departments. It is a history that has roots in the philosophical and fantastic narratives of the ancient past, and which continues not only to flourish in the twenty-first century but to serve as a cross-cultural language spoken throughout every corner of the globe. When the study of science fiction literature entered the academy in the 1950s and 1960s – slowly and hesitatingly at first, but gaining in status and momentum throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century – it became increasingly evident to students of science fiction that it was not merely the literature of imaginary objects, but a literature that evolved out of, and celebrated, the human compulsion to push beyond the horizon of the real in order to gain new perspective on human nature and experience. This compulsion has manifested itself in every major twentieth- and twenty-first-century cultural enterprise, from literary production to the visual arts, to music, architecture, and interactive media. From the vantage point of the first quarter of the twenty-first century, the contributions of science fiction to human intellectual and cultural endeavor are clearly not something one can capture through mere description of the forms, tropes, and conventions of science fiction literature. It is no longer adequate to approach the study of

¹ See Gerry Canavan, “The Suvin Event,” in Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (New York: Ralahine Utopian Studies, 2016 [1979]).

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science fiction simply as the description of some particular and peculiar enterprise, at the fringes of culture; instead, one must tell the story of the evolution of the transnational and multimedia manifestations of science fiction as it has intersected with the larger cultural movements and socio-political fluctuations of its age. It is this intellectual history – the history of the century-old, many-headed *project* of science fiction, writ large – that *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction* seeks to narrate.

Since the formal study of science fiction first established itself in the academy, science fiction has shifted from a position on the margins of scholarly discourse to the position it holds at present as a recognized and established literary genre that has generated a significant and growing body of scholarship. As a field of study, it has proven both popular and provocative: courses in science fiction are now taught at colleges and universities throughout the United States, Europe, and beyond, and narratives in a variety of media – print, film, music, art, architecture – that engage the conventions and ideas of science fiction are pervasive in contemporary culture. Meanwhile, scholarship on science fiction has gone well past its infancy, and is now entrenched in the academy, with numerous high-quality books published by academic presses on the subject every year, several major academic journals devoted to the topic – including *Science Fiction Studies*, *Extrapolation*, *Foundation*, *FEMSPEC*, *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, *Science Fiction Film and Television*, *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, as well as the trade journal *Locus* – and courses at both the undergraduate and graduate levels on the subject being offered at universities across the United States and abroad. The Science Fiction Research Association (SFRA) and International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts (IAFA) both boast strong membership, holding annual conferences which attract scholars from around the world. Scholarly books on science fiction run the gamut from monographs that pursue a particular idea or thesis, through edited collections of essays, to a growing body of reference works, encyclopedias, guidebooks, and so forth. Thus, with the maturation of the study of science fiction – and its ongoing and profound popularity in American and world pop culture – the time for serious consideration of the history of science fiction has hit a kind of critical mass.

In this *Cambridge History of Science Fiction*, as will become evident, the editors have taken an inclusive approach to science fiction, but not so inclusive as to make science fiction out of literally anything. The boundary line between

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inclusion and exclusion from the category is one of the key debates that emerge from among the array of definitions offered by critics of science fiction over the past century. The sweep of these many definitions have been discussed numerous times by other critics and will not be repeated here. Nevertheless, there will be value to examining a few definitions of science fiction in order to draw from them some of the broad definitional principles that frame *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction*.

As others have pointed out over the past several decades, there is a certain wit and charm to the notion that, as Damon Knight somewhat famously suggested in 1952, science fiction is “what we point to when we say it.”² But this formulation has little value as a critical tool, whatever its value might be in highlighting the complicated marketing and cultural factors that feed into the discussion between *genre* and *non-genre* science fiction. Likewise, the division among authors and critics over the decades between the relative merits of the labels *science fiction*, *speculative fiction*, and even *structural fabulation*, not to mention the entertaining tensions between “sci-fi” and “SF” (vs. “sf”) and the wretched “SyFy” and beyond, all point to the range of nuances that characterized, in part, the various attempts by different groups – authors, academics, fandoms, detractors – to situate science fiction and determine its boundaries (much less determine its relationship to adjacent genre categories like *fantasy*, *horror*, *noir*, *romance*, *realism*, and so on).³

There is a certain logic to Knight’s quip, however. Not only does SF remain deeply imbricated in its relationship to a marketing category – SF is, as much as anything else, a *brand* – SF in the main is something that, in this twenty-first century, is readily recognizable to both academic and non-academic communities. Much of this is due to the fact of the pervasive nature of the SF aesthetic in modern culture, coupled with the array of tropes and conventions that have characterized the aesthetic for a century or more – from bug-eyed monsters to spaceships to physics-defying wormholes and warp drives. If there is a spaceship, a ray gun, an alien – it’s SF. Arguments tend to occur around the fringes, and often occur at the point of overlap with

² Damon Knight, *In Search of Wonder: Essays on Modern Science Fiction* (Chicago: Advent Publishers, 1967), p. 1. For a brief survey and discussion of the many different attempts to define science fiction in the twentieth century, see the entry on “Definitions of SF” in the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (see www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/definitions_of_sf). See also the “Science Fiction” entry in Gary K. Wolfe’s *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy* (New York: Greenwood, 1986). Another good entry point into the critical literature on the definition of science fiction is James Gunn and Matthew Candelaria, eds., *Speculations on Speculation: Theories of Science Fiction* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005).

³ As will soon become evident, in these pages we will favor SF as the catch-all term.

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related genres. Many utopian novels are in some fashion or another SF novels, for sure, but not all of them. What must a utopian novel have in order for it to make sense to call it SF? Even more pointed are debates related to the role of *science* in SF. It is well documented that some of the earliest claims on behalf of the category – from Gernsback and others – stressed that the science of SF must have a certain underlying credibility to it. Not in the way that the recent “mundane” science fiction movement would define it, of course – but there was a kind of claim of extrapolative veracity to the science in science fiction that almost aligned the movement, in a way, with the generous claims made by Émile Zola on behalf of *Le roman expérimental* in the late nineteenth century (an unlikely pairing on the surface, perhaps, but there is an odd kinship to be found here, too).

Yet, as any reader of SF knows, claims for the veracity or extrapolative “reasonableness” of the *science* in science fiction are instantaneously problematic. SF has little to do with real scientific investigation, and many texts routinely considered among the greatest instances of the category are scientifically quite silly. Moreover, whole subgenres of SF – the time travel fantasy, for instance – have little or nothing to do with “science.” Indeed, if science is in any way the key to understanding science fiction, one might have to lop off whole subcategories, like the alternative history novel, which may seem perfectly fine when the novel is Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* (2004) but which seems decidedly problematic when one is considering Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) – and which seems inevitably to lead us to the absurdity of declaring that a foundational science fictional text like *Star Wars* isn’t *actually* SF because, because, because . . .

The issues that have arisen from the “science” of SF lead numerous critics and authors over the twenty-first century to shift toward substitute labels and reconceptualizations, with *speculative fiction* now the dominant alternative. SF, too, has come to be a convenient shorthand symbol for the entire aesthetic category, precisely *because* it sidesteps the entire *science v. speculative* debate while still recognizing some inherent coherence to the concept itself.⁴ Even if we can successfully sidestep the science debate, attempts to define SF still have plenty of other academic questions to answer: for instance, what distinguishes SF from fantasy, and is SF a subset of fantasy, or vice versa, or are they actually separate categories that perform different cultural and intellectual work? For many genre questions, these oppositions

⁴ As Gary K. Wolfe has noted, it’s likely that SF is “almost universally favored in the science-fiction community” precisely because the two letters don’t really stand for anything. See “Coming to Terms,” in Gunn and Candelaria, eds., *Speculations on Speculation*.

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are not simply academic questions but fiercely debated moral allegiances; genre work both inside and outside the academy has typically proceeded from the assumption that certain genres are “good” for us (politically, ethically, cognitively, you name it) and that others are “bad” – a critical impasse that is only now being moved beyond.

Several attempts to provide a working definition of SF have produced compelling results. Perhaps the best known attempt within academic circles is the definition provided by Darko Suvin: “SF is, then, a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment.”⁵ Suvin uses this idea of a dialectical interplay between cognition and estrangement, between similarity and difference, between science and fiction, as the focal point for extended discussion in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* on the utopian nature of SF and how it differs both from realist writing and from other varieties of the fantastic. Central to Suvin’s definition is the concept he introduces of the *novum* – the new thing – the element or elements introduced into a work of science fiction that sets it apart from the zero world – that is, the consensus, empirical world we inhabit.

This definition has been the subject of considerable analysis and debate, and is commonly used as a starting point for analysis of the genre even by those who ultimately reject Suvin’s terms – but, as influential as Suvin’s work on this topic has been, his is only one of dozens of attempts to precisely define what SF is, and what it isn’t, over the past century. In his Pioneer-Award-winning essay “On Defining SF, or Not: Genre Theory, SF, and History” – now the spine of his paradigm-shifting monograph *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System* (2017) – John Rieder offers a schema for understanding how to understand SF as a “historical process”:

- (1) sf is history and mutable;
- (2) sf has no essence, no single unifying characteristic, and no point of origin;
- (3) sf is not a set of texts, but rather a way of using texts and drawing relationships among them;
- (4) sf’s identity is a differentially articulated position in an historical and mutable field of genres;

⁵ Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 7–8.

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- (5) attribution of the identity of sf to a text constitutes an active intervention in its distribution and reception.⁶

In the spirit of Rieder's analysis, therefore, we might sidestep this now-routinized definitional pitfall by noting that all compelling attempts to define SF as "the literature of x " seem to truly capture a core element of many of the texts – broadly conceived to include art, literature, film, music, architecture, video games, and more – that comprise the category, but nonetheless they all fall short of being descriptive of everything we could conceivably associate with the category or they are so broad as to encapsulate far more than we would typically associate with the category (and even, sometimes, both at the same time).

Taking our cues from Knight, Rieder, Suvin, and Carl Freedman, among others, the editors of this *Cambridge History of Science Fiction* understand the term "SF" to in general denote a very broad category of aesthetic enterprise that posits some discontinuity with the empirical world – as opposed to continuity with the empirical world – and further understand that the nature of that discontinuity is in alignment with a principally post-Enlightenment value system that is oriented toward naturalized as opposed to supernaturalized extrapolation. SF and fantasy are not diametrically opposed, we would suggest, but exist along a spectrum of discontinuity, where the discontinuities described in the narrative – in the spirit of Suvin's cognitive estrangement and especially Freedman's "cognition effect"⁷ – are either more or less domesticated within a more or less rational metanarrative framework. Thus the ghosts of *A Christmas Carol* might well be a barred term for SF, while the ghosts of *Ghostbusters* slip through – and the dreamlike time travel of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* indeed feels less like SF to us than the technologically fueled time travel of *The Time Machine* and *Back to the Future*. But even these sorts of bare, gestural demarcations feel highly provisional, subject to change at any moment – and certainly at the mercy of some persuasive argument to the contrary. The true, absolute essence of SF, that odd, unnamable thing we feel we recognize immediately when we see it, is

⁶ John Rieder, "On Defining SF, or Not: Genre Theory, SF, and History," *Science Fiction Studies* 37, 2 (July 2010), pp. 192–3.

⁷ See Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), p. 18: "All these examples suggest that 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 any epistemological judgment external to the text itself or the rationality or irrationality of the latter's imaginings, but rather . . . the attitude of the text itself to the kind of estrangements being performed."

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always moving away from us at warp speed; its shields are up and its cloaking device is fully engaged.

Thus the editors of the present volume have no intention of answering all of the questions above, nor of settling the debate, *per se*, regarding the definition of SF. Instead, we take SF as a historical process in which many sorts of people have intervened – or can be seen, retroactively, to have been intervening – in different ways, to different extents, as far back as human memory goes. And as our writers in the coming chapters capably demonstrate, these sorts of debates among writers, critics, and fans are themselves a key part of the history of this or any genre. Thus in one telling SF can be seen to trace its DNA back to the speculative narrative writing of the ancient epic – but in another it is a specifically post-Enlightenment or specifically *modernist* narrative product, emerging slowly out of the transformative political and economic conditions of the nineteenth century before achieving a kind of cultural saturation in the twentieth and twenty-first. One telling might emphasize its European, or even Anglo-American, roots – while another might center the science fictional imaginations of France, Germany, Russia, Latin America, America, China, or Japan, while still another might see SF as emerging precisely out of the transnational and indeed transhistorical crosscurrents of global fandom.

Our study traces these myriad and overlapping interventions in SF history – in casting SF as a historical process – through three general periods: “Before the New Wave,” “The New Wave,” and “After the New Wave.” We have chosen this organizational structure to reflect the central importance of the New Wave as a turning point in the genre’s development and history, not simply in terms of the changing creative output of (some of) its writers but also in the shift in SF’s reception in culture, particularly in the academy. Science fiction studies, as an academic discipline, itself begins during the New Wave, and remains strongly informed by New Wave concerns about utopia and empire, while continuing to focus a tremendous amount of attention on 1970s New Wave writers like Philip K. Dick, Ursula K. Le Guin, Samuel R. Delany, and Octavia E. Butler to this day. For the person interested in science fiction in an academic context, we feel that special attention to the New Wave is required to make sense of the traditions and practices of SF scholarship that originated in that time. The preferred themes, tropes, and literary-cultural forms of SF completely transformed during the revolutionary decade of the New Wave, with contemporary work tending to follow in that mold. The sorts of demographic changes in authorship and readership (especially around increased diversity and inclusivity) that now structure the

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field also begin in earnest during that time, producing an SF imagination that can finally be said to be, for the first time, truly global.

Across each of three divisions, we focus on the major texts and trends of each historical moment. We also trace a number of recognizable “arcs” on crucial subtopics across our chapters: the history of non-literary media forms, especially film and television; the large impact of fandom and fan practices on the history of the field; the contributions of nonwhite and nonmale authors; and the critical history of science fiction studies. Alongside the chronological trajectory, we have also made space for breakout chapters on particularly crucial themes, such as war, consumerism, postmodernism, and environmentalism. We hope these embedded mini-arcs provide useful historical subnarratives that tell part of the immense larger story that is SF – a symphony in which even a critical volume as large and as daunting as a Cambridge History can strike only the most hesitant opening note.