Bridges to Science Fiction and Fantasy: Outstanding Essays from the J. Lloyd Eaton Conferences

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Gregory Benford, Gary Westfahl, Howard V. Hendrix and Joseph D. Miller, editors. *Bridges to Science Fiction and Fantasy: Outstanding Essays from the J. Lloyd Eaton Conferences*. McFarland, 2018. Paperback, 263 pp, $49.95. ISBN 9781476669281.

IN 1979, scholars and authors of science fiction and fantasy literature first met in Riverside, California, for a conference sponsored by the University library's enormous collection of speculative literature. Hosted by George Slusser and others, each three-day affair typically focussed on one broad aspect of the field and led to a volume of papers. Annual at first, it later became more sporadic and peripatetic, ending in 2017.

Scholarship in this area is hampered by a vast creative landscape and the largely imitative nature of its creations, which many social and literary scholars dismiss. Exceptions always plague generalizations about science fiction ("sf") and fantasy, a problem exacerbated by their spread beyond the U.S. and growing popularity on film and streaming tv. The core of all literature, fantasy was not recognized as a distinct literary genre until the rise of realism, and did not produce much commentary before the 1960s. A subset of fantasy, sf is Eaton's usual focus, excluding future studies, technological forecasting, urban planning, and a variety of "topias," let alone sword-and-sorcery, ghost stories, and other recyclings of the supernatural. Often renovated by new scientific discoveries and dismissals of old ones, sf sometimes revives its own lost dreams, and the spectre of deconstruction hovers over the entire enterprise of the humanities, reminding us that the ultimate value of literature and criticism may lie more in questions raised than arguments settled. Omitting essay titles and chronological order, what follows on a thematic spectrum summarizes principle arguments, adding some personal reactions, comparisons, and evaluations.

Genre

Patrick Parrinder locates sf's parentage in the literary epic vs. the "costume dramas" of romance typical of fantasy. Noting the anti-humanism of Wells' "scientific romances," he sees both speculation and prophecy in *The Time Machine* (1895), his prime example. Broadening the scope, Eric S. Rabkin sources fantasy in the human need to use words and tell stories to understand virtually anything (including science). Given the fallibility of our senses, language, and cultures, fantasy is an inevitable admixture of everything we think

we know. Probing even more deeply, Stephen Potts shows Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* (1961) positing that nothing can be known for certain about that alien planet's global life form, implying the same limits apply to us and our world. Even empirical evidence is interpreted variably across cultures and over time.

Science and Aliens

David Brin's wandering essay recognizes that mastering new science is difficult but privileges science (searching for what may be) over engineering (how to deal with it). Asking if we are running out of subject matter for "hard" (science-based) sf,. he claims that "what if" stories may prepare us for future reality, which I think it is minimally adumbrated in, and seldom invented for the fiction itself.

For Gregory Benford the alien or strangeness is sf's primary theme. Reliance on comparisons and metaphors assimilates it to the familiar, or uses Modernist "trapdoors" like those of Philip K. Dick, and *Star Trek* reduces it to engineering problems. The truly alien in *Solaris*, however, challenges humanistic conceptions of reality. Depending on conventional scales relying on sense impressions, science may never be certain, but sound extrapolation placed in context relies also on data, i.e. objects, causes, qualities, and especially math.. Benford's afterword says new forms of beacons help us seek aliens, and recognizes the effects of economic limits, ours and theirs.

Poul Anderson shows how he builds an alien world and how setting impacts the nature and actions of characters. Fantasy worlds also need cohesion, but they are less inventive than historical, ahistorical, even playful, with exceptions for mental worlds like those of Phillip K. Dick and private myths exemplified by Ursula K. Le Guin and Lewis Carroll. John Huntington sees sympathizing with aliens as all but impossible; our inherent hostility to the other makes a benign alien a contradiction in terms. Aliens may be too different to conceptualize, like Tweel in Stanley Weinbaum's "A Martian Odyssey (1934)." My sense is that Tweels's apparent trouble expressing emotions may reflect our social and psychological perception.

Human Limitations

"Nonsense" terms (as in Lewis Carroll) illustrate for Joseph D. Miller fun for its own sake but also the necessary ambiguity of description. In another slight piece, Gary Westfahl finds food distasteful in many sf futures, which approximate a "hospital" environment. Taking a different angle on food, Paul Alkon finds cannibalism in sf and fantasy distinctly estranging and grotesque. Class-determined, it suggests tribal or even alien behavior, from Swift's "A Modest Proposal" (1729) to vampires and Wells's Morlocks, and several works by

Robert A. Heinlein. Extremely rare, tales of self-consumption usually involve deprivation, but in Komatsu's"The Savage Mouth" (1968) future science shows it as deliberate and almost complete.

Befor the contemporary rise of sf and modern medicine, H. Bruce Franklin shows how women had been largely superior healers, their herbal skills leading incompetent male medics and Church officials to brand them as witches. The deaths of Mary Shelley's mother and children may have led to her killing off both "mothers" of Elizabeth Frankenstein, and the whole human race in *The Last Man* (1826). Real science effects medical cures today, but sf mostly blames technology for apocalyptic plagues, with the exception of AIDS. Franklin's afterword recognizes that post-mortal characters today as in *Ghost in the Shell* (2017; manga 1989), recall Frankenstein, and names only warfare and climate change as today's manmade plagues, not acknowledging the rise of Ebola and germs' increasing resistance to antibiotics.

Mediating between human lifespans and the scope of the universe, Robert Crossley finds a minimal attempt to overcome mortality in museums, libraries, cathedrals and even the city of Rome (in *The Last Man)*. Like the Palace of Green Porcelain in *The Time Machine*, reliquaries in *Last and First Men* (1930), *Earth Abides* (1949) and *Riddley Walker* (1980) (1980) both reveal and deprecate human vanity. *Childhood's End* (1953) nd *The Drowned World* (1962) enlarge and deepen the perspective beyond Earth as we know it. His afterword cites more recent books portraying sf's museum function, and points out that even sf itself now has a place in museums.

N. Kathleen Hayles finds immortality narratives embody their opposite, but cyber immortality opens new vistas and questions. "Embodied virtuality" provides continuity with an on/off switch and variable memory (comparable to time travel alterations). William Gibson's cyberspace is crowded, and its point of view literally creates characters. Cyber immortality even inverts biological gender: immersion is treated as female, male as escape. Her afterword sees today's cyber reality as more implausible and interesting than even sophisticated fiction depicts.

As in Bernard Shaw's *Back to Methuselah* (1922) Frederic Jameson's turgid and verbose essay inevitably finds in longevity a metaphor for class struggle. Extended life recasts morality and forecasts ultimate boredom, for which death is a solution. Frank McConnell sees little interest in the failures of technological and theological immortality. Remembered speech, story promises a kind of immortality, but even stories require closure. Dave Bowman becomes Starchild, but *2001* (1968), *Dune* (1965), and *Blade Runner* (1982) all face mortality. Sf stories present a gnostic and pastoral phase before the "homecoming" of death.

Visual SF

Vivian Sobchack says American sf films typically address, displace or condense male fear and desire in action and dreams, despite some counter examples. In a technological world the U.S. treats as masculine, biological sex is rare, distracting, or displaced racially or mechanically. Ships penetrate space and alien takeover is rape; even Ripley in Alien (1979) is masculine in ship routine and battle scenes, though she is stripped at the end.. Her lengthy afterword argues that after 9/11 (America's castration) abnegation replaced repression, while perpetual danger, ambiguity, weakness, time travel do-overs, and selfies increase as in *The Edge of Tomorrow* (2014). Reaction to disaster is muted, males more nurturing, and women more prominent although "othered." Teenage disaster flicks feature female protagonists, albeit with repressive older females, while abjection is clearly denied in *The Martian* (2015) with its helpful female administrator.

In their discussion of comic books and "bandes dessinees," Danielle Chatelain and George Slusser compare French and American treatments of space travel. French illustrations once treated rockets as trains, and their juvenile comics follow Verne's emphasis on nuts-and-bolts. American comic books retain flying man characters, while spaceships in French cover art are often metaphors for regressive and inward-looking adult stories using space as a mental image.

Kirk Hampton and Carol MacKay praise the late Richard Powers's paperback cover art, typically fusing flesh and technology, progressing toward abstraction and surrealism comparable to that of Yves Tanguy . Much of it treats sf as reaching toward the unknowable or the end of time. His portfolio *Spacetimewarp* (1983) also sparkles with witty commentary. Afterword: The internet and numerous blogs have increaaed wider sharing of his work which includes larger canvasses and has had wide-ranging influences. [Why cut this?]

Howard Hendrix shows *Omni* magazine gentrifying sf fiction publications in the 1960s. Slick in size and material, it was more general, sexy, and expensive, aimed at an older, wealthier and more cosmopolitan audience. Reflecting late capitalism and the global economy, its postmodern posturing merged fiction with other elements, but its proportion of content focusing on science and the future gradually shrank. Cyberpunks were its stepchildren, apolitical, amoral, valorizing the status quo, while digest magazines preserved traditional sf and its warnings and social criticism. His aftereword reaffirms that conclusion without mentioning other slicks that have surfaced, mostly emphasizing fantasy and cinema.

Canonical Issues

Rebuked for teaching and writing about sf, and even for departing from the sf canon, Marlene

Barr argues that reading sf, especially women authors, challenges the feminist dystopia of the patriarchal world. Pointing to Donald Trump, her afterword reaffirms her feminist argument, but has little to do with sf.. The perpetual hostility to sf of the academic canon is ironic for Thomas Shippey. Its inherent novelty challenges conservatism, yet Modernist academia loves other kinds of novelty. Darwinism in *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) inverts Odysseus' encounter with Circe, discounting significant differences between man and beast. *The Time Machine* also forecasts a blasphemous upending like that of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), dismissing predecessors, challenging authority (i.e., imperialism), and promoting the authority of science. While Postmodern theory rejects all authority, engineer elevated sf is intertextual, building on other sf and on science.

I agree with Carl Freedman that the "Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution" (1959) pales next to the 19th century debate between Thomas Henry Huxley and Matthew Arnold. He shows that F.R. Leavis and C. P. Snow understood little of each other's positions, although both showed a preference for Tolstoy and 19th century realism. Both physics and Modernism were already inaccessible to lay audiences, and sf's attempt to mediate between the "two cultures" was itself estranging, His afterword: finds Leavis's reputation higher and Snow's lower, while mutual incomprehension remains. He does not acknowledge that sf and fantasy may have become more popular and understood since midcentury.

This collection is not a "best of," but it documents the spectrum of scholarship and analysis of sf and fantasy as it became a cottage industry. Few of these articles were groundbreaking even when first presented, but this volume collects in one place the growth of scholarship and criticism in the field, which should be of interest to libraries, scholars, teachers and even some fans whose curiosity runs in that direction.