Disputing the Deluge: Collected 21st-Century Writings on Utopia, Narration, and Survival, by Darko Suvin

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The most recent crises of the capitalocene need little restatement. We are living through the global aftermath of COVID-19 and its uneven violence; sieges on democracy in the US (January 6th, the overturn of Roe vs. Wade, shooting and police brutality) and the UK (strikes and the absolute disintegration of social fabric in the UK with a government incapable of leading the country); and the Russia-Ukraine war and global supply chain disruptions, most accurately reflected in energy systems (both food and fuel).

Suvin’s warning, in his latest book, against this “new beast slouching toward Bethlehem: Global Capitalism without a Human Face” (101), then, takes on a profound urgency. The violent and uneven unfolding of the capitalist-climate crisis gives credence to the ultimatum that animates the collection: “Socialism or barbarism” (40). “Utopia or bust” (chapter 23). “There is no alternative” (343).

Disputing the Deluge, published in the thick of these tumultuous events in January 2022, is a varied collection of Suvin’s writing from the first two decades of the 21st century. Unlike his earlier collection Defined by a Hollow (2010), which featured long form essays and book chapters pulling together the seminal concepts through which Suvin has shaped our field (cognition, estrangement, the novum, etc.), Disputing is derived from more diverse sources: lectures/speeches (chapter 1), interviews (chapters 5, 6, 13, 15, 19), conference papers (chapter 20, 23), poems (chapters 7, 12, 21), and brief notes/letters (chapters 3, 16, 17).

More in-depth arguments about the mechanism of sf and sf texts/authors take up a relatively slight percentage of the collection, with many of the same longstanding arguments reflected since Metamorphoses of Science Fiction (MOSF): the false value of popular fantasy (chapter 2), a rejection of Orwell (chapter 22), the esteem of Ursula K. le Guin’s fiction (chapter 11), the cultural force of science and Darwinism (chapter 14), as well as militarist sf (Chapter 9). While the chapters are presented and numbered in chronological order, Suvin groups them into 4 categories:
(1) narratology and epistemology, (2) the political context and prospects or potentialities of SF, Utopia/nism and Fantasy, (3) extensive probes in and for these two last years, and (4) short incidentals or paralipomena.

As a whole, Suvin’s intellectual meditations on the role of sf and criticism today in this book are more condensed, arguably more accessible, but no less powerful. The collection takes stock of our current situation and the dialectical relationship that sf has with this socio-historical reality. The two key questions Suvin asks are, “Where are we?” (290) and “What are we doing wrong?” (294).

The answer to the first centers on the deluge, focused most clearly in the last two chapters of the collection, in which Suvin tackles the crises of the capitalocene and COVID-19 pandemic. The flood has become an increasingly resonant late-capitalist metaphor, surfacing in the most incisive critiques of the climate-capitalist crisis (Naomi Klein’s Shock Doctrine [2007], Junot Diaz’s post-Haitian Earthquake “Apocalypse” [2010], and again in Philip Wegner’s preface to Defined by a Hollow, “Emerging from the Flood in Which We Are Sinking: Or, Reading with Darko Suvin (Again)” [2010]). Suvin likewise describes the capitalocene as an "overwhelming antiutopian tsunami we are drowning in, swimming desperately each and every moment to take hold of a bit of sustaining jetsam and flotsam or even to come within sight of an island" (290). The two foci he identifies within the capitalocene, “war and ecocide” (291), are particularly striking in a book published a month before the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Suvin emphasises, however, that the crisis of our time is also a cultural one: the global culture industry has been inundated with works which present visions of pseudo- or antiutopia. He writes that “one of the greatest tricks that global late capitalism ever pulled is to cloak its own exploitative practices in the guise of utopia” (5). The flood of supposedly utopian books, films and TV series is instead characterised by nihilism, escapism, or naive optimism in capitalist technoscience. This deluge represents a withering of our utopian imagination, signalled by an inability to imagine the transition to a radically different future. The book is concerned, then, with the urgent task of combating antiutopian forces within world-capitalist ideology and mass culture industries.

In answering the second question, “What are we doing wrong?” Suvin provides a twofold response. Foremost, he returns to the inherently utopian impulse of sf’s formal mechanism. He is one of the most prolific dialectical, Marxist, historicist critics dealing with sf and Utopia, and his establishment of the inseparability of the two, calling the latter the “sociopolitical subgenre of science fiction” (76) in Metamorphoses of Science Fiction (MOSF), has been widely affirmed by scholars including Fredric Jameson, Philip Wegner, and Tom Moylan.

However, instead of unfolding traditionally academic, detailed arguments around sf as a socio-historical literary genre, the book consists of an assemblage of sources that offer brief but powerful summaries of what sf does. Indeed, the familiar concepts of cognition, estrangement and the novum do not, in this collection, receive the same depth of treatment as they do in Suvin’s earlier writings. In MOSF Suvin asserted the relevance and connection that the form of sf has with the
reader’s own socio-historical reality. The great detail of his argument was necessary to the end of claiming a space for literary criticism in a discourse that had up till then (the 1970s) treated utopia as a political program.

In *Disputing*, however, these concepts receive little exposition, mentioned only briefly in his treatment of other themes and their political relevances in the 21st century (see chapter 9 on militarism, 128) or summarised in shorter discussions (see chapter 5 library questionnaire response, 91). These engagements with sf texts are situated within each piece amongst wider reflections around global politics or musings of a more personal note.

Suvin’s chimeric book thus reads as a hybrid between a political manifesto, autobiography, and a book on utopian form—rather than a theoretical book exploring sf’s utopian impulse. The collection of works in *Disputing* makes it collage-like, a form that Jameson describes as characterising our late-capitalist age. The “sequence of qualities or styles… becomes in itself a kind of narrative structure opened up to some properly allegorical investment” (*Allegory* 320); it transforms the “structural function of the author himself” (*Archaeologies* 263) and the work of interpretation. Like the truly new Novum Suvin describes, one that is “by definition yet unknown, strange, and risky”, the revision that Suvin suggests for criticism in this book is “not only more like a ball of yarn or amoeba rhizomatically reaching here and there, it is uncertain and open” (21) in a time when the “primacy of linear plot is to be spurned” (21).

Through the varied collection, then, Suvin argues that literary theory and criticism in the 21st century need to move beyond what and how we read. Situating his treatment of sf amidst a more general, urgent critique of capitalocenic ideology, Suvin refines the goal of literary criticism to centre political epistemology as a key goal.

The inclusion of these wider epistemological goals in *Disputing* is thrown into relief when held in conversation with Jameson’s *Archaeologies*, another seminal book on utopia and sf. In *Archaeologies*, Jameson lays out an explanation of the utopian impulse as generating a negative form of knowledge. It “succeeds by failure” (289) and “serves the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment” (xiii). By forcing us to meditate on the impossible (223), Jameson argues, “the best Utopias are those that fail the most comprehensively” (xiii).

The result of this dialectical, historicist method that Jameson and Suvin share results in an understanding of culture in which the limitations of our own historical and ideological positions mean that true utopia, or radical difference, feels impossible to perceive. Yet in *Disputing*, Suvin defines quite clearly the antiutopia we find ourselves in, and even sketches a minimum and maximum utopian program of a post-COVID-19 future (chapter 24). On the one hand, there is capitalism and all that accompanies its “GOD imperative (Harvey, “Grow or Die”)” (291): violence (333), fascism, and animality (308). On the other, there is socialism/democracy (91), freedom (339), sensual bodily experience (15) and care (333).
Overall, the explicit call to arms in *Disputing* is partly a response to the times we find ourselves in and the need to find means of survival. Suvin insists that criticism today must involve “not only writing about fiction” (123) but also looking towards “an integral epistemological rethinking… for which the tools have (yet) to be invented” (123). The urgency with which Suvin writes about Utopia is also accompanied, however, by a sense that he is settling into the long sunset of his prolific career. Suvin himself admits that *Disputing* “may well be (his) final one on SF and utopia” (20), and the collection contains reflections on the passing of his peers and colleagues (chapters 10, 19), as well as his career (chapter 6, chapter 7 “Autobiography 2004,” chapter 16).

What tasks, then, does Suvin leave us?

The most obvious one is to vigilantly guard the line between “useful and harmful” (248) fictions. This has always sat uncomfortably with post-Suvin critics. In the face of climate breakdown, Suvin’s heuristics provides limited mileage in analysing bad utopias at best, and disregards a huge proportion of cli-fi works at worst. Eric Smith also points out the risks of policing the distinctions between high and mass culture, in a time when our discipline is dismantling the canon and including an increasing number of works from the Global South.

The other major task is to make the forms of knowledge generated within literary studies more relevant than simply aesthetic judgements. In his attention to political epistemology, Suvin holds a deep faith and hope in the power of fiction to create better alternative futures. While he might be preaching to the converted on the value of sf, the book prompts us to further meditate upon the question of how we should hold communion with thinkers and doers beyond our field, in a world where the stuff of literary studies has to compete increasingly with other disciplines for funding and attention. His thoroughly interdisciplinary analyses of economics, politics, history and ecology are woven together with an astute understanding of culture. And with slight irony, Suvin’s insistence on greater attention to utopia’s necessarily literary qualities in *MOSF* is flipped as he leaves us with an imperative to pay greater attention to the broader ideologies and sites of revolution that sit alongside and beyond fiction.

**Works Cited**


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