

Lecture #4 Thurs 31 Jan 2008 What is Science Fiction?

Descriptive (how “science fiction” is actually *used*) not prescriptive (“how it *ought* to be used”)

Genre: A distinctive class or category of literary composition.

(Alt definition): A bundle of conventions (tropes).

Trope: A familiar and repeated image, theme, setting, or event; a convention.

Examples of tropes:

Mystery: the eccentric detective

Detective fiction: tough, hard-drinking private eye investigating partner’s death.

Children’s literature: orphans

Fantasy: wizards; dragons; “ordinary” person with hidden extraordinary ability powers

Science fiction: alien invasion; robot or computer rebellion; hyperdrive; the future; alternate history

Definitions or descriptions of science fiction

The term “Science Fiction”

scientific romance (H. G. Wells c. 1895)

scientifiction (Hugo Gernsback 1915)

science fiction (Gernsback 1929)

SF = science fiction or speculative fiction or science fantasy or structural fabulation;

sci-fi (coined by ? Robert Heinlein 1949)

Central problem in a definition or description: how to accurately differentiate from fantasy

Oxford English Dictionary: “imaginative fiction based on postulated scientific discoveries or spectacular environmental changes, freq. set in the future or on other planets and involving space or time travel”

Ben Bova “[stories] in which some aspect of future science or high technology is so integral to the story that, if you take away the science or technology, the story collapses.”

James Gunn

Tradition literature: literature of continuity

Fantasy: literature of difference

SF: literature of change

“Fantasy occurs in a world not congruent with ours or is incongruent in some significant way.”

SF: “Some significant element of the situation is different from the world with which we are familiar, and the characters cannot respond...in customary ways...a changed situation requires analysis and a different response.”

Central question: how did we get there from here?

Kim Stanley Robinson

“Science fiction is the history that we cannot know”

“*Mainstream*” literature (present-day and historical fiction): factually possible-- *could* be happening/have happened, is connected to our present world

Fantasy is counterfactual and impossible; disconnected from our present world

SF is counterfactual but potentially possible; contiguously connected to present world through plausible history

SF only requires change of history;

Fantasy requires change of history AND change in laws of physics, etc.

Sense of *potential historical change* is important

More differences between SF and fantasy

SF and fantasy differ broadly in

-- attitude towards cultural narratives

-- demands on the reader’s participation

Science fiction can be disruptive and subversive

Fantasy tends to be normative (supporting “traditional” narratives)

A common science fiction trope is nontraditional social relations and attitude e.g. towards race, gender, sexuality

Reading science fiction

SF readers actively engage in constructing narrative world and deciphering the story

Furthermore, SF readers *invited* to question plausibility/possibility of the narrative world

HISTORY OF LITERATURE

Next we will look at history of science fiction and SF subgenres using 2 lenses:

- developments in “literary” fiction
(classicism → modernism → postmodernism)
- Bloom’s “anxiety of influence

Classical/romantic: “traditional” plots.

Protagonists encounters obstacles, either overcomes or fails.

Cultural narratives frame stories (social class vs. merit).

Emphasis on plot and character. *Austen, Dickens*.

Modernism: Themes of alienation from society and the self.

Cultural narratives are corrupt and irrelevant; replaced by existential paradigms.

Emphasis on mood, style, disruptive narrative techniques.

Joyce, Hemmingway, Faulkner, Camus.

Postmodernism: Skepticism towards metanarratives;

nothing means anything. Fragmentation of society and self.

Emphasis and celebration of incongruities, sense of play.

Beat poets, William S. Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon, Umberto Eco.

The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry (Harold Bloom, 1973)

Bloom: tension for and against previous poets (precursors).

Two basic strategies: Extension and correction *or* Reversals and subversions