

Lecture #6 Thurs Feb 7, 2008: How to Read Science Fiction

Part 1: How to read SF (ideas from Samuel R. Delaney)

(A) Language functions differently in SF than in “mainstream” literature.

Statements metaphorical in “mainstream” can be literal in SF.

The SF reader must more actively question: what is real (in the context of the story)?

(B) The reader has to fill in more gaps than usual.

Fiction draws us in by setting up mysteries. In mainstream fiction the mystery is plot and character (even in modernist and postmodern fiction).

In SF there is another dimension—the mystery of *setting*.

(C) The SF reader tries to answer to question: “How did we get **there** from **here**?”

Part 2: Rhetorical strategies in talking about science

There a number of rhetorical tools SF authors use to discuss or incorporate science and technology.

(1) *Technobabble* (or *gobbledygook*). Using technical and scientific words randomly or without context.

(2) *Skating fast over thin ice*. Don’t go into detail. Don’t justify. Just *assume* it works.

(3) Extrapolation or reversal. Of current scientific trends or ideas. (Also of cultural trends and ideas)

(4) Argument by analogy. Arguing from known scientific facts and principles to hypothetical science.

(5) Combining two existing fields into a new one .

(6) The Gadget.

(7) Miracles and limitations. limit story to one (or a very few) “miracles” or bending of known science,

More believable if you include rules or limitations

- most science and technology have limitations
- constraints can lead to more interesting plot

Part 3: How is science used in SF?

(0) “Exotic” setting = a long time ago/in the future, in a galaxy far, far away

(1) As “marker” of change, but not a central change itself.

(2) Science or technology as symbol. Many SF symbols deal with either *anxieties* or boundaries or limitations.

(3) Science or technology as theme.

Simplistic: Science is dangerous. Science as hero

More nuanced: unintended consequences science and technology or the dangers of relying too much on technology

(4) Science as point of view, as a way to know the world.

(5) Science as plot. A central issue or puzzle: how do we solve this problem? Hard SF.

How to analyze *science* in SF stories

- (1) Ask: how is the reader introduced to science in the story? What is the “change” from here-and-now?
- (2) Note throughout the story the “science talk.” Ask: what strategies used by author to talk about science?
- (3) What role does science and technology play in the story?
- (4) What larger narratives *about* science (if any) are there?

Examples: *Frankenstein* is about danger of science without responsibility.

The Time Machine is about ultimate futility of knowledge.

The War of the Worlds draws analogies between cultural, technological, and biological “invasions”

Accuracy of science in SF

Science in SF is usually wrong. How does it matter?

- * verisimilitude enhances willing suspension of disbelief
- * functions as allusions in “literary” fiction: rewards to knowledgeable reader

the more integral science is to the story, the more important the verisimilitude.