

AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION. THE HISTORY OF THE GENRE

The history of any literary tradition - a genre in this case - is complex and multifaceted. The focus in this article is limited to those events and trends in the history of American science fiction which seem most germane to the genre itself. The time history of the genre ranges from the undifferentiated "wonder stories" of the later 19th century through a mid- twentieth-century zenith of separation and self-awareness that began to break down by the late 1960s, mirroring the wider cultural upheavals of that period, and finally concluding with the cyberpunk sensibility of the early 1980s.

Typically inaugurated with the 1818 publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, science fiction has wended its way through American culture throughout the twentieth century. The scientific and technological discoveries that began during the Industrial Revolution have continued to shape the lives of the entire planet's population, and none more so than those of Americans. Shelley's literary mediation on the changing dynamic between humanity and its technology has found numerous repetitions and revaluations in American writers over 179 years. These mediations have become collectively referred to as *science fiction*.

Even though the term "science fiction" was first used by the English writer William Wilson in an 1851 treatise on the poetry of science, it was *Amazing Stories* editor Hugo Gernsback's use of the term in 1929 that resonated with what most people now think of when they hear the term— space travel, bug-eyed aliens, and wondrous technology [7, 7-8].

In 1888, Edward Bellamy published *Looking Backward, 2000-1887*. Within two years, its wide popularity was manifested in the establishment of 162 Bellamy clubs, political leagues inspired by the changes in society that Bellamy envisioned in his novel. While the 2000 of the novel was Utopian, the presentation of that Utopia prefigured Hugo Gernsback's emphasis, forty years later, of the educational or instructional possibilities (and even responsibilities) of science fiction. The generic importance of Bellamy's novel rests not only in its agency in shaping the future through the Bellamy clubs, but on its vision of a future logically extrapolated from current conditions and in its opening up of the future as a viable setting for literary fiction [7, 20-21].

The wide popular appeal of Bellamy's novel ignited a consumptive demand for the texts that would come to be called science fiction in the following years. Facilitating the productive supply of science fiction was "the development of the technique of producing cheap paper from wood- pulp, in the 1880s, [which] created the possibility of mass production of cheap magazines as well as by the name by which they came to be known - the pulps [7, 35]. In addition to the paper itself, the introduction of mechanical typesetting "more sophisticated flatbed process, and the invention of the Napier and Hoi cylinder press" also helped to increase availability of science fiction [3, 441]. The inexpensiveness of the pulps helped science fiction gain the wide readership, as well as the low respectability, which was to characterize the genre for the next seven or eight decades. While the long-term political effects of the Bellamy clubs were negligible, especially, for example, in comparison with Arthur C. Clarke's prescient idea of a global communications network utilizing geosynchronous satellites [9, 71], Bellamy's novel strengthened or in some cases initiated the tendency of the genre to expect such realistic foreshadowing of future technologies from its authors.

While these foreshadowing tended to be darker in European science fiction following World War I thanks to the "back yard" experience of the technologies of tanks, airplanes, mustard gas, and machine guns, in the United States the distance from the immediacy of war helped shelter its science fiction community from thinking of the future as darkly as its European counterpart. Hence, the growth in American science fiction continued relatively unabated from its roots in the late nineteenth century, gaining a larger audience who relied on pulps such as *Weird Tales*, *Amazing Stories*, and *Astounding Science-Fiction* to keep up-to-date on recent scientific and unscientific strides with the help of the magazines' stories and editorials. The year 1926 saw the first specifically science fiction magazine - *Amazing Stories*, edited by Hugo Gernsback. Gernsback was one of the early catalysts of science fiction who, in his editorials and his publishing decisions, manifested much of what early twentieth-century science fiction is known for: the concern with educating the public on the developments in science and technology, and the emphasis on logic and rationality as a problem-solving technique [7, 51] more importantly, with his use of the term "science fiction," Gernsback forced the genre to become aware of itself as such: "Those who had written or published scientific romance, invention stories, "different stories," or scientific fiction before the advent of Hugo Gernsback do not seem to have spent time wondering about how to define the genre within which they were writing. If there were no attempts to define the genre, then arguably the writers were not conscious that they were writing within a genre, and therefore were not writing within a genre. A genre requires a consciousness of appropriate conventions, a certain aesthetic, and even a certain ideology, as

well as readers who have particular expectations. It is more than a publishing category, because it assumes some bond or imaginary contract between writer and reader. Science fiction is what science fiction writers write for science fiction readers" [7, 51].

During the inter-war period, the "walls" of the science fiction separate position began to be raised. Young readers who had grown up reading the early pulps now became writers who could safely assume a base of science fictional knowledge in their readers. These fans were still the controlling force in the genre, writing to the editors of the pulps, critiquing stories they found unacceptable.

In tracing the literary evolution of science fiction, 1938 is a convenient starting point for the next period of the genre - the Golden Age. It has been suggested that the Golden Age of the Science Fiction is when the reader is 14 years old with an intact sense of wonder and an uncritical attitude towards texts. However in 1938 John W. Campbell, Jr. became the editor of *Astounding Science-Fiction* and continued to be a guiding voice in the genre through the magazine's 1960 title change to *Analog*, and until his death in 1971. While he shared with Gernsback a belief in the importance of the educational role of science fiction, he primarily considered it to be entertainment, and like Gernsback, used his editorials and publishing decisions to shape science fiction in his own image. Rather than focusing on the gadgetry and the technology which fueled much earlier science fiction, Campbell redirected the readers' attention to the *effects* of the technology on more realistic and well-developed characters. Towards that end, he emphasized the soft sciences of biology, sociology, and psychology, as well as history and parapsychology. The science that was necessary for a reader's understanding was now no longer plopped unexpectedly into a text. Rather, Campbell encouraged a more seamless mixing of story and background, which started science fiction on the road to literary quality and respectability. Although that goal was still some three decades hence. The depth and plausibility of plot, setting, as well as the fantastic technology that the authors created also gained importance under Campbell, as did a more credible and logical connection between the narrative and

established facts. Finally, rather than the simple extrapolation of the future from current conditions, which started with Bellamy half a century earlier, Campbell emphasized historical *change* - the future was not going to be just like today with the addition of flying cars and space travel, because the very conditions of existence are going to change, in part at least because of the technological changes themselves [7, 56-57].

While Gernsback helped define the genre, Campbell shaped Science Fiction by expecting more of his writers and of the audience. By nurturing greater textual sophistication, thereby expanding the genre's boundaries. Campbell provided science fiction writers with more freedom to consider what they produced: the tide of the genre began to turn towards production, although the consumption of science fiction continued to maintain its gravity in the transaction of meaning. The significance of this transition lies in the fact that the legacy of science fiction's consumption-driven beginnings still holds considerable sway, much more than in other literary genres, where the feedback loop from the audience to the authors is more tenuous. Honing their skills under Campbell in *Astounding* as well as in other magazines after World War II, writers like Asimov, Bradbury, and Robert Heinlein, who were themselves the product of the pulps and the science fiction genre, began to expand it from within [7, 64].

The early 1950s saw a spurt of growth for the genre, having slowly developed until then almost exclusively in the pulps and their offspring magazines. The increasing literary standards invoked by Campbell drew scores of writers to the field who were accommodated by a magazine boom. In 1949 three new science fiction magazines started, four in 1951, seven in 1952, and fourteen in 1953. Even though most did not last more than several issues, and some older, established magazines folded during the decade, the opportunities for writers to publish were exceptional, and were expanded and qualitatively changed in 1952. Even though high-speed presses and synthetic glue had then developed as early as the mid-1930s, publishing houses did not connect science fiction with these developments for another two decades [8,443]. In 1952, four publishing houses started science fiction paper back lines with such authors as *Ballantine*, *Pocket* and *Signet*. While the others sharpened their skills in the magazines in the late 1950s. Authors like Philip K. Dick and Frank Herbert, as well as Ursula K. LeGuin, Harlan Ellison, J. G. Ballard, Kurt Vonnegut and Samuel R. Delany started their publishing careers during this science fiction "publishing boom" [1, 58].

Increasingly, science fiction writers considered their work to be an intellectual game of "what if...?" which led them into playing with classic themes and plots [7, 88]. While the genre had been a separate unit for some time, inward-looking and self referential, by the mid-1950s more and more authors were capitalizing upon the genre's tropes by developing them. Here lies the heyday of the genre because with many of its generic markers and conventions in

place, authors began to self-consciously play with those signifiers and strategies. In return, the audience responded favorably because the genre was sufficiently established and the readers sufficiently well-read to handle the growing self-reflexivity of science fiction literature during the last half of the decade.

Another marker of science fiction's development toward generic maturity was the 1956 publication of *In Search of Wonder* by Damon Knight. This book is not important only because it was the first critical collection on contemporary science fiction, but also because it was both written by a fan and published by *Advent*, a fan-based publishing house in Chicago [7, 137]. Despite being joined by the academic journal *Extrapolation* three years later, critical and academic works concerning science fiction were slow in coming for the next decade and a half. The consistently growing loyalty and size of the fan base over time also marks the maturation of the genre: the annual *World Science Fiction Convention*, started in 1939 and only skipping 1942 and 1945, attests to the continuing importance of science fiction consumption.

While the early 1960s saw the development of the New Wave in British science fiction, this next major phase did not gain momentum in the United States until the later years of the decade. With references ranging from Egyptology to popular music to advertising, the New Wave reflected the early developments of postmodernism. The New Wave also manifested the decentering of the subject and the absence of a single "truth" or "authority" that postmodernism is predicated upon. The authors of the American New Wave incorporated "a genuinely interest in style, psychological complexity, and ... character, as well as some topics that were at least conventionally regarded as taboo by traditional science fiction standards, with sex topping off the list" [7, 173]. The American New Wave also reflected the leading edge of a postmodern sensibility.

The importance of the New Wave rests in breaching the genre walls and in moving it closer to literary respectability not only through a more self-conscious and nuanced literary approach, but also through an awareness of reality's complexities, technology's inability to address them, and the pessimistic appraisal of human nature [7, 175]. While the New Wave was mainly a title imposed upon selected science fiction that deviated from the classic preoccupations of the genre, it also points to the beginnings of the genre's devolution and decentering.

The fragmentation of the genre, typified by traditionally-oriented science fiction writers', editors', and fans' resistance to the writing of the New Wave, was aided by the growing field of fantasy literature, which was given an enormous boost when two separate houses concurrently republished J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy in 1965, one year after the United States began sending regular troops to Vietnam. The former coherence of the genre was further destabilized by the increasing numbers of female writers. Although they

are not all considered to be feminist writers, their voices also helped shape the traditionally male-dominated science fiction genre. While the lunar landing in 1969 brought home the fact that science fiction was a part of everyday life, much genre-challenging science fiction diverged widely from the classic roots of previous decades.

Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965) and Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), are both products of the New Wave. Herbert's novel is complex and pessimistic about individual human nature, while endowing the species as a whole with a drive to better itself, although this is accomplished through conflict and violence. The fully realized culture of the Fremen in the novel is the clearest indicator of the literary complexity toward which science fiction was now moving. From foodways to language of kinetics, Herbert created a detailed culture from an anthropologist's notes. But what makes this novel so groundbreaking for the genre is that it also attained the depth, complexity, and literary aspirations which science fiction had been reaching for over the previous four or five decades. While the focus on politics in the novel can now be regarded as a logical extension of the space operas of the 1930s, in 1965 it was new and exciting; no doubt this was one of the reasons why *Dune* won the first-ever Nebula Award in that year.

Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* "remains a prime example of New Wave science fiction, with its extremely dark portrayal of a future inundated with drugs, advertising, economics, and neuroses. This last is most clearly illustrated by the main character's intense concern with whether or not his neighbors suspect that his pet sheep is in fact electric" [4, 189].

By the early 1970s, scholars began to look at science fiction seriously, and the long sought-after goal of literary respectability was within reach. While *Extrapolation* had been around since 1959, two more academic journals appeared in the early 1970s: *Foundation: The Review of Science Fiction* in 1972 and *Science-Fiction Studies* in 1973.

The final recognition of the science fiction genre came with cyberpunk, starting with the 1975 publication of John Brunner's *Shockwave Rider*, and finally with Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner* and William Gibson's *Neuromancer* in 1984. Cyberpunk literature utilized classic science fiction iconography as well as New Wave sensibilities in creating bleak near-future worlds stocked with sex, drugs, prosthetics, computers, cosmetic surgery, and the reign of information as power [7, 194]. Reaction to the years of Reagan presidency is observed in cyberpunk writing through the focus on economic conditions, which are usually very serious for all but the most wealthy individuals on the planet. The consistent questioning of what is reality in cyberpunk relies on the decentered subject of postmodernism - the recurrent imagining of a non-American future through Japanese geopolitical economic dominance [7, 198].

Both the explosion of the Challenger shuttle in January of 1986 and the discontinuation of the Star Wars Defense program in 1993 added up some new features to the genre: current technology is not as awe-inspiring as it is written, and a technological solving of a terrible problem - a favored myth of classic science fiction - is still and ever a dream.

Though the genre has acquired new tendencies and features pertaining to the present-day times, it is still capable of involving the audience and getting everyone interested in what imaginary future worlds could be like.

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