

# What is SF? Some Thoughts on Genre

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## 1. What is SF?

The question I have been asked to address in this lecture is, "What Is SF?" I want to preface my taking up that question by saying that, although a question is a good place to start, perhaps an answer is not where one should hope to end up. Questions are indeed supposed to yield answers, but often the best use of the answers is to generate new questions.

So let's start with a very simple-minded approach to the question. What do the letters "SF" stand for? Think of this as a multiple-choice test. Does SF stand for

- a) science fiction?
- b) speculative fiction?
- c) sci-fi?
- d) or all of the above?

The correct answer is D, all of the above. The abbreviated term, "SF," has become widely current precisely because it allows people not to have to choose between saying "science fiction" and "speculative fiction" and "sci-fi." It is an umbrella term whose broad, non-specific reference to these other terms allows us to designate a historical and generic field they all share.

This is not to say that there are not meaningful distinctions among these terms, because there are. Each has a different historical resonance, refers to a different milieu, and calls up a different set of ambitions and emphases. "Science fiction" is the most widely used; in the academy we call the field that studies this kind of fiction "science fiction studies," not "SF studies" or speculative fiction studies" and definitely not "sci-fi studies." Science fiction is a term that comes out of the pulp magazine milieu, an early 20th century publishing phenomenon that designates not just magazines published using a certain kind of cheap paper, but more importantly magazines that targeted niche audiences by publishing a certain, often predictable and formulaic, kind of fiction. There were pulps dedicated to detective fiction, spy fiction, Westerns, adventure, romance, and other genres. The term science fiction became widely used in the pulps in the 1930s, and it is strongly associated with the dominant form taken by it in the 1940s and 1950s pulp magazines, a period that continues to be called science fiction's Golden Age

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even though the honorific connotations of that period term have long ago faded away. In the 1950s, when the dominant market for this kind of fiction began to shift from the pulp magazines to paperbacks, science fiction was the term that almost always would appear on the cover of a paperback to signal its genre to potential readers. This is still true today. In an English language bookstore, one will often find a science fiction section, and almost never a speculative fiction or sci-fi section.

The term speculative fiction arose as an attempt to separate certain fictional works and publishing efforts from the commercialism and the expectation of formulaic predictability that had accrued around the term science fiction. Taking off in the 1960s, "speculative fiction" signaled a deliberate departure from "Golden Age" practices, especially a higher degree of literary ambition, less concern with attaining a high volume of sales, and more with reaching a more highly educated, more artistically sophisticated and demanding audience.

"Sci-fi," in contrast, branches off from science fiction in the opposite direction, towards the mass market. It is most strongly associated in its origins with cinema, especially with the spate of B-movies or creature features of the 1950s, and it persists today as the designation of a cable channel (the SyFy channel) and as the standard term used to designate blockbuster SF cinema and mass market enterprises like the *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* franchises.

There are other terms that come into this mix, as well. Long before there was science fiction there was the *roman scientifique*, which is the term Jules Verne used for novels like *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (Orig. *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*, 1870) and *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (Orig. *Voyage au centre de la Terre*, 1864) in the 1860s and 1870s. In the 1890s and 1900s, when H. G. Wells published such highly influential novels as *The Time Machine* (1895), *The War of the Worlds* (1898), and *First Men in the Moon* (1901), the generic term he used for them was the "scientific romance," and this was not a term peculiar to Wells but rather a common one for a trend in fiction that he recognized himself to be sharing in and contributing to. Later, in the 1920s, the very first pulp magazine to dedicate itself to carving out a niche for this kind of fiction, *Amazing Stories* (first issue, April 1926), used the odd portmanteau term "scientifiction" on its cover for the first few years of its run.

Along with this welter of terms comes a corresponding welter of definitions. Some of the most important and influential definitions were advanced by editors trying to define the type of fiction they wanted to publish.<sup>1</sup> In that first issue of *Amazing Stories*, for example, Hugo Gernsback declared that "By 'scientifiction'

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1 All of the following definitions are quoted in "Definitions of Science Fiction", in Clute and Nicholls 311-13.

I mean the Jules Verne, H. G. Wells and Edgar Allan Poe type of story – a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision." Every cover of *Amazing Stories* for the first two years of its run announced the presence of a reprinted piece by Wells or Verne, often both. In the 1940s, the most powerful editor in the milieu of science fiction magazines was John W. Campbell of *Astounding*, who was instrumental to the careers of such Golden Age figures as Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, and A. E. Van Vogt. Campbell defined his preferred brand of science fiction this way: "Scientific methodology involves the proposition that a well-constructed theory will not only explain away known phenomena, but will also predict new and still undiscovered phenomena. Science fiction tries to do much the same – and write up, in story form, what the results look like when applied not only to machines, but to human society as well." In the 1960s, Judith Merrill was one of the central forces in launching the "New Wave" of science fiction—or rather speculative fiction—in North America (in England the most influential New Wave editor was Michael Moorcock). Merrill defined the fiction she wanted to promote as "Speculative fiction: stories whose objective is to explore, to discover, to *learn*, by means of projection, extrapolation, analogue, hypothesis-and-paper experimentation, something about the nature of the universe, of man, or 'reality.'"

I could go on. It would be easy to list thirty significantly variant definitions instead of only these three (see the article on "Definitions of Science Fiction" in Clute and Nicholls, 311-13). And it would be worthwhile and interesting to sort out the differences among these definitions, to look for the common ground they share (or to note the lack of common ground, in some cases), and to set each definition in its context and assess its impact. But that is not what I propose to do here. I propose that we ought to step back from the project of looking for the "right" definition of SF to ask, instead, why there are so many of them to choose from. We could take our clue here from Kathleen Spencer, who, in her essay "The Red Sun is High, the Blue Low: Towards a Stylistic Description of Science Fiction,"<sup>2</sup> begins by suggesting that the question "What is SF?" is not the right place to start if we want to define the genre. Instead, she says, we should ask, "How do readers identify a text as SF?" I think that is a very good question, but I think it implies another one that has logical priority over it.

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2 During the original lecture series and seminar, organized by Lars Schmeink at the University of Hamburg (April to July 2012), out of which for the 'Virtual Science Fiction' project developed, this essay was required course reading for the session. Cf. <http://virtual-sf.com/>.

## 2. What is (a) Genre?

Before we ask what SF is, we ought to establish, first, what it means to define a genre. The question of how readers identify a text as SF implies a more fundamental one: why do readers identify texts as belonging to genres at all? What sort of thing is it they are looking for? What does it matter whether they do so or not? And is it, perhaps, something about genre identifications *per se* that causes the proliferation of names and definitions around the phenomenon we are calling "SF"?

Genre is not, as it may at first appear from the preceding discussion, merely a literary phenomenon, and it is not just about the taxonomic classification of varieties of stories. It is a ubiquitous and extremely important feature of everyday communication, and it is a constitutive element of the construction of meaning in all kinds of circumstances. John Frow, in his excellent book entitled *Genre*, defines genre very broadly as "a set of highly organised constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning" (10). Tzvetan Todorov, in *Genres in Discourse*, defines it in the same spirit but with a bit more specificity:

In a given society, the recurrence of certain discursive properties is institutionalized, and individual texts are produced and perceived in relation to the norm constituted by that codification. A genre, whether literary or not, is nothing other than that codification of discursive properties. (18f.)

If you are tempted to doubt the observation that genre is an important and pervasive element of everyday communication, think to yourself about the last time you had the unpleasant experience of saying something you meant to be a joke but your listener took as a serious statement. Like a lot of other things that are so ever-present we take them for granted, the importance of genre is probably most easily sensed when it fails to achieve its usual purpose, when speaker and listener cross their generic circuits – so that what you thought was a suggestion is received as a command, or as a criticism, or as an insult ("Oh, so you think I'm fat/stupid/desperate...?").

While it is wise to be alert to the power and importance of genre in all kinds of communication, our more immediate concern is indeed with genre as an aspect of narrative fiction, that is, with the codification of discursive properties that get repeated in the telling and reading of stories. This sort of codification is most easily and commonly apprehended as a way of classifying different stories, as in the definition of genre offered by the Wikipedia: "A **literary genre** is a category of literary composition. Genres may be determined by literary technique, tone, content, or even (as in the case of fiction) length."<sup>3</sup> One could hardly imagine a blander or more noncommittal definition of genre, but it is certainly

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3 Since Wikipedia-entries are prone to continuous changes, this definition has been last accessed on July 5th, 2012 under the link: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary\\_genre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary_genre).

correct as far as it goes. The venerable scholars René Wellek and Austin Warren, in *Theory of Literature*, make the ramifications of such a purely classificatory understanding of genre more clear: "Theory of genres is a principle of order: it classifies literature and literary history not by time or place (period or national language) but by specifically literary types of organization or structure" (226). That is, according to Wellek and Warren, when we pay attention to the genre of a literary work we do not concern ourselves with whether it is German or Greek, whether it was written two thousand years ago or last week. We are concerned only with its formal characteristics, its organizing principles. Wellek and Warren understand genre to be something that has a kind of ideal and abstract existence. They assume that genre is all about form, and that form is essentially separable from historical context. In other words, if a statement is a joke in ancient Rome, it will be a joke everywhere and anytime else. If we ask, then, what these taxonomically-oriented definitions of the phenomenon of literary genre tell us to look for when we identify the genre of a text, we find that the study of genre becomes a search for the ideal, non-historical form that makes the text an exemplar or member of the genre, whether it be a joke, a tragedy, or a science fiction story.

Some more recent genre theorists make some important modifications and additions to this notion of genre. Kathleen Spencer cites the definition of genre advanced by Jonathan Culler in *Structuralist Poetics*: "a conventional function of language, a particular relation to the world which serves as norm or expectation to guide the reader in his or her encounter with the text" (cit. in Spencer 35). In contrast to the approach of Wellek and Warren, here the formal properties of the text no longer seem to be the self-sufficient indicators of genre. Something more is at stake than mere classification; now the reader's norms and expectations enter the picture. This may add an element of historical variation to our understanding of genre, for instance by helping to explain why a given utterance might be taken as a joke by those with one set of norms and expectations and not by another group with a different set.

John Frow gives us a fuller elaboration of this stress on the relationship of genres to norms and expectations:

I understand genre to be a historically specific pattern of organisation of semiotic material along a number of dimensions in a specific medium and in relation to particular types of situational constraints which help shape this pattern. Genre in turn acts as a constraint upon – that is, a structuring and shaping of – meaning and value at the level of text for certain strategic ends; it produces effects of truth and authority that are specific to it, and projects a 'world' that is generically specific. (73)

The key element that I want to stress is Frow's notion of a generic world. He argues that every genre projects a certain version of things, a more or less coherent universe of norms and expectations that he calls the genre's projected world.

Among his examples are the world of the situation comedy, the world of the curse, and the world of the headline (86f.). These worlds are shaped by "certain strategic ends" that have been conventionalized by repetition into the generic "codification of discursive properties" (19) described by Todorov. If our investigation into genre is informed by Frow's approach, then, we will be looking not only for those ideal generic forms mentioned earlier, but also for a set of norms and expectations that may be more historically and geographically specific, and for the generic worlds to which those norms and expectations give shape.

### 3. A Formal Definition of Science Fiction

Now we can test out a formal definition of science fiction. By far the best and most influential such definition of the genre is the one first advanced by Darko Suvin in the essay "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre" in 1972 and elaborated most fully in what has probably been the single most influential book of criticism on science fiction, Suvin's *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979). Suvin defines science fiction as "a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (*Metamorphoses* 7f.). The main formal device of a science fiction text, according to Suvin, is its setting, which must vary in some significant way from the author's empirical environment. That element of variation from the real (or realist) world is what Suvin calls estrangement. But an estranged, non-realist setting is not in itself sufficient to make a narrative into science fiction. The setting must also be rigorously logical and self-consistent: that is what Suvin means by the interaction of estrangement with cognition. So another name for the type of fiction we call science fiction, and according to Suvin a more precise and accurate one, is the literature of cognitive estrangement.

Suvin's definition of science fiction serves as the basis and point of departure for Kathleen Spencer's analysis of how readers identify a text as science fiction. As the title of her essay indicates, Spencer focuses on science fiction's main formal device, the setting. Following not only Suvin but also building upon a groundbreaking essay by Samuel R. Delany on the construction of science fiction sentences ("About 5,750 Words") and an even more famous piece by Roland Barthes on "The Reality Effect" in realist fiction, Spencer emphasizes science fiction's use of realist techniques to create its non-realist worlds.

Barthes brilliantly analyzes the way what he calls meaningless or "useless details" (in regards to the text's structure; 142) create 'the effect of the real' in standard realist fiction. Meaningless details are objects that exist in the story but

have no symbolic, metaphorical, or allegorical significance, and are not crucial to any mechanism of the plot or revelation of character. They are simply there – things like the wind, the dust, a table or a chair – and their function is precisely to establish what we might call the *there-ness* of the fictional world, which in a realist piece means its reference to and correspondence with 'the author's empirical environment.'

Spencer argues that in a science fiction story meaningless details perform the same function as in a realist text, but in a quite different way. Instead of establishing an undercurrent of *there-ness* that calls no attention to itself and simply confirms realist expectations and norms about the generic world of the text, the meaningless detail in science fiction often sticks out. Its presence is jarring, as in the sentence, "The red sun is high, the blue low." Instead of signaling the correspondence of the generic world to the author's empirical environment, the meaningless details do the opposite: they signal its difference. The meaningless detail is estranged, but this estrangement is not shouted from the rooftop. Instead – and this is the crucial turn in Spencer's analysis – it is presented exactly as if it were *not* estranged, as if the audience actually lived in this world of red and blue suns and would find their presence no more remarkable than the reader of a realist text finds the sun, the breeze, the dust and so on. In short, the science fiction text uses realist techniques to create an imaginary world *for an imaginary audience* who understands that world according to the conventions of standard realism. The challenge that the science fiction narrative presents to its non-imaginary readers, then, is for them to learn gradually, sentence by sentence and detail by detail, to read as if they were members of that imaginary audience. This challenge, and the text's supplying its readers with sufficient means to meet it, is what readers look for when they identify a text as science fiction, according to Spencer.

This is a really interesting, insightful, and useful analysis of what makes a science fiction narrative distinctive in comparison to other genres of narrative. It has strong advantages, but it also has some drawbacks. Its advantages are, first, that it shows very clearly how science fiction depends upon and modifies the techniques of literary realism for some of its most salient qualities. Second, it does an excellent job of exposing the nature of what we can call the generic contract, the set of expectations that readers attach to the term science fiction. Third, Spencer's analysis provides readers new to the genre with a very good explanation of how to read a science fiction narrative *as* science fiction.

But, as I said, Spencer's approach has its limitations as well. First of all, it is entirely focused on a single medium, prose fiction, but a number of other media are and have been very important vehicles for science fiction, especially film and television from the mid-20th century on, and the stage in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It is not at all clear that Spencer's analysis of the effect of the real

in science fiction sentences works the same way for the visual depiction of science fictional settings on stage or screen. A second limitation is that Spencer's analysis ignores the actual diversity of science fiction. Her analysis presupposes a set of readers attuned to a very particular kind of expectation, and, while this set of readers definitely exists, it is not so easy to say that it corresponds exactly with the entire set of readers of science fiction. In fact, the kind of quasi-realist story she describes, with its imaginary meaningless details, is one that developed in a specific milieu, that of science fiction magazine fiction during the so-called Golden Age of the 1940s, and remains a dominant feature of the work of such prominent writers as Robert A. Heinlein and Philip K. Dick into the 1960s and 1970s. But all along there have been other readers attuned to different sets of expectations. For instance, it is not at all clear that the fans of space opera (adventure stories set in outer space, as in *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*) are well described by Spencer's analysis. Third, and most seriously, this analysis has severe historical limitations. It leaves out, for example, all of the works of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, none of which work the way Spencer's examples do. This analysis does not help us to understand science fiction's history. In focusing on a kind of style and an important and extremely interesting set of formal devices that developed in the American magazines of the 1930s and 1940s, it unfortunately offers us little insight into why these devices should have developed when and where they did, except for the implicit conclusion that science fiction developed in tandem with the techniques of modern realism.

We could argue that our formal definition of science fiction has led us back to the situation that Wellek and Warren say is the proper sphere of genre theory – the search for an ideal form without reference to its historical or geographical milieu. But in this case what has happened is not quite that an ideal form has been identified. It is rather that the narrative practices of a certain period and place have been privileged as being definitive of the genre. Yet a glance at the history of science fiction reveals that it is more diverse (cf. for example Gary Westfahl's lecture on "The Three Golden Ages of Science Fiction"). How are we to understand this gap between formal definition and historical description?

#### **4. Prescription vs. Description**

I think a good way to get at the difference between the formalist and the historical descriptions of the genre is to compare prescriptive vs. descriptive definitions. We can make the difference clear easily enough by means of an example. Let us ask, "What is a Christian?" One way to answer is to say that a Christian is someone who walks in the light of Christ, who follows the lessons of the beatitudes,



who is humble and meek, turns the other cheek, and considers charity the highest of all virtues. But another, quite different but equally valid answer would be that a Christian is someone who attends a Christian church, or who was born of Christian parents and baptized into a Christian congregation, or simply someone who checks the box "Christian" on a census form. You see that the first answer is prescriptive: a Christian is someone who lives up to a certain set of ideals, who fulfills a more or less rigorous set of conditions that make him or her a "real" Christian. The second reply is merely descriptive. The sense of the proper or the hierarchical that inevitably informs prescription is absent. It simply asserts that this or that person is referred to in some circumstances by the term "Christian," and whether the churchgoing or self-identifying person in question is charitable and upright or even believes in God is beside the point. All that matters is the way that the designation is used, whether in common, everyday communication or in a scientific survey like a census.

If we return now to our original question, "What is SF?", equipped with this opposition between prescription and description, it is easy enough to see that the formal definition proffered by Darko Suvin is prescriptive rather than descriptive: 'real' science fiction consists only of those stories that fulfill the dual demands of estrangement and cognition. Suvin even says that something like 95% of what gets called science fiction does not actually fulfill the conditions for the literature of cognitive estrangement, but is rather some other kind of thing that has unfortunately been lumped together with real SF because of the vagaries of publishing practices and the imprecision of earlier critics. Obviously, a descriptive definition would have to include that excluded 95%, and its account of science fiction would somehow have to try to understand the lumping together that Suvin decries.

Let me try to illustrate this difference between formal prescription and historical description more vividly. The formalist approach yields us a conceptualization of the genre, which Suvin visualizes this way in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*:

	NATURALISTIC	ESTRANGED
COGNITIVE	“realistic” literature	SF (& pastoral)
NONCOGNITIVE	sub-literature of “realism”	<i>metaphysical</i> : myth, folktale, fantasy

Figure 1: *Suvin's categories of cognition and estrangement (cf. Metamorphoses 20f.)*

	HISTORICAL	ESTRANGED
PLURIDIMENSIONAL	“realistic” literature	SF
ONE DIMENSIONAL	sub-literature of “realism”	myth, folktale, fantasy

Figure 2: *Suvin's categories of dimensionality and estrangement (cf. Metamorphoses 20f.)*

The diagrams map the genre onto a set of rigidly distinct logical possibilities that are, first of all, clearly hierarchical (how could it not be better to be cognitive than non-cognitive, or pluridimensional than one dimensional; and who would choose to indulge in sub-literature rather than striving to produce literature?), and second, presented as if they were inevitable and eternal. There is no hint, for instance, that the "cognitive" status of myth or folktale might vary over time.

A descriptive account of science fiction is bound to be messier than this. The meaning of generic choices is going to vary over time, and the choices themselves are going to change. It's not going to be a matter of rigid hierarchies or binary oppositions, but of lots of small distinctions that do not sort themselves out quite so neatly. It will involve lots of different people in lots of different circumstances with lots of different priorities making lots of different choices for lots of different

reasons with lots of different degrees of success. A visualization of this history is going to be much messier than Suvin's diagrams, something perhaps like this:

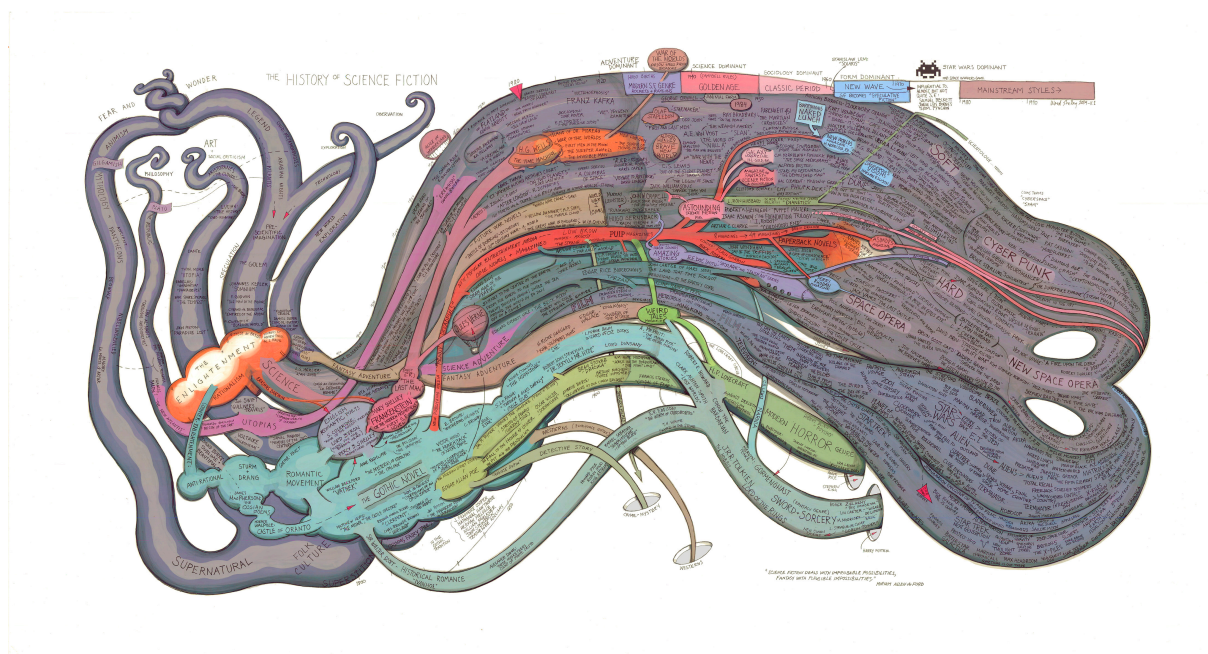


Figure 3: Ward Shelley's map of "The History of Science Fiction."  
<http://www.wardshelley.com/paintings/pages/HistoryofScienceFiction.html>

Let me say a few things about this wonderful map of the history of science fiction created by Ward Shelley and available for close-up viewing and purchase on his website. If you take that close up look, you'll find that the upper left hand corner of the map depicts science fiction's origins as a complex intertwining of motives and practices including fear and wonder, exploration and observation, philosophy and art. The octopus-like strands leading down to the lower left hand corner of the map represent mythology, legend, and travel accounts among other things. The red cloud (or maybe it's an internal organ) at the bottom left is labeled the Enlightenment, and one of its largest offshoots is modern science, closely intertwined with utopian speculation and with a strand of adventure fiction that leads to the figure of Jules Verne depicted as a hot-air balloon. But the even larger bluish-green complex that develops below the red one represents the counter-Enlightenment, including the early 19th century Romantic movement and the Gothic novel, and here one finds not Verne but another of the canonical writers invoked by Gernsback in the first issue of *Amazing*, Edgar Allan Poe. Even more interesting is the fact that this bluish-green area represents the intermingling of science fiction with other genres, most prominently horror, but also including detective fiction and the Western. The neighborliness of these different genres is matched by the map's attention to the interaction among different media such as

the pulp magazine, film, and paperback novels. In short, rather than isolating the qualities that make some texts 'real' SF and others just fakes, which is the clear tendency of Suvin's diagrams, this map presents us with the complex affiliations and crisscrossing itineraries of a multitude of actors, motives, practices, movements, traditions, and tendencies.

Now I am going to propose a thesis which I have argued at greater length elsewhere: that the crucial difference between a formalist genre theory and a historical one is the recognition of agency (cf. "On Defining Science Fiction, Or Not"). For a formalist theory, a genre is a grammatical or structural possibility that just happens to be realized, or not, in one time and place and not another. For a historical theory, genre is an act, not a fact. It is something people do, not something that 'exists' in a text. Rick Altman, in a book that I think is essential reading for anyone interested in genre theory, argues that "genres are not inert categories shared by all [...] but discursive claims made by real speakers for particular purposes in specific situations" (101). Taking their lead from Altman, Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint, in a piece provocatively titled "There Is No Such Thing As Science Fiction," write that

genres are never, as frequently perceived, objects which already exist in the world and which are subsequently studied by genre critics, but fluid and tenuous constructions made by the interaction of various claims and practices by writers, producers, distributors, marketers, readers, fans, critics and other discursive agents. (48)

These kinds of claims are quite clearly in tune with Ward Shelley's tangled map of the history of science fiction, and they are steadfastly opposed to Suvin's prescriptive attitude that 95% of genre identification must simply be ignored. John Frow spells out a further implication of this emphasis on agency:

[G]enre is not a *property* of a text but is a function of reading. Genre is a category that we *impute* to texts [...] Genre is neither a property of (and located 'in') texts, nor a projection of (and located 'in') readers; it exists as a part of the relationship between texts and readers, and it has a systemic existence. It is a shared convention with a social force. (102)

In the final section of this lecture I want to look a little more closely at what it means to say that genres have "a systemic existence."

## 5. Genre Systems and the Field of Cultural Production

We can get at the systemic character of genre by posing the question: "Is Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* a detective story?" There is certainly a good argument to be made that it is. The main character is a famous solver of puzzles. He learns of

a horrible crime and is tasked with solving it. He collects evidence and interrogates witnesses. Gradually he unravels the truth, and exposes and punishes the criminal.

But here is the catch: none of this has any bearing on whether or not the play is a tragedy. One could just as easily imagine a play featuring a famous solver of puzzles, the unraveling of a crime, and the punishment of the wrongdoer that would be a comedy, or a satire. *Oedipus the King* is, of course, Aristotle's prime example of the genre of tragedy in the *Poetics*. But the features that distinguish it as a tragedy, rather than a comedy or a satire, have nothing to do with the features that distinguish it as a detective story, rather than, for instance, a piece of science fiction or a Western (and it very clearly does not resemble either of those genres). The point is that tragedy and the detective story belong to two entirely different *systems* of genre identification. What is significant and decisive for identifying the play's genre according to one system turns out to be entirely irrelevant according to the other.

It is a well-known feature of language that sounds may be significant in one language and meaningless in another. For instance, in my own experience of learning to speak Italian I stumbled more than once over the fact that double consonants, which are meaningless in English, must be pronounced in Italian. In English it makes no difference at all whether you pronounce the two t's in "little" or the two m's in "bummer." Though it may sound kind of funny if you make a point of pronouncing them, no one will be confused about what you are saying. But in Italian, if you fail to pronounce both of the v's in the word "avvocato," you may have just called your lawyer an avocado. We are dealing with the same sort of phenomenon in the two generic identities of *Oedipus the King*. It is a tragedy in one "language," a detective story in another, because the formal features that count as significant depend, not on the text, but on the system. The determination of whether *Oedipus* is a tragedy refers it to what we can call the classical genre system, where its generically significant features are those that distinguish it from comedy, satire, epic, lyric, and so on. The determination of whether it is a detective story refers instead to a much more recently formed system that we can call the modern mass cultural genre system, one that distinguishes detective stories from science fiction, horror, love stories, and the rest of the generic identities articulated within that system.

John Frow draws several conclusions from this systemic nature of genre identification:

- Texts do not belong to genres; rather, those who read and write texts use genres.
- Genres exist as relations between texts, not as properties of a text in isolation.

- Almost every text uses multiple genres; it activates an "economy of genres" (Frow 2) both within itself and in relation to other texts.

The first two points emphasize the difference between an approach to genre that emphasizes agency and one that assumes the text's genre is determined by its formal features – for instance its literary technique, its tone, or its content, as the Wikipedia says. Frow is pressing home the point that genres are acts and not facts, and that genre resides in systems of relationships, not in isolated textual properties. The third point, about the "economy of genres" within a given text, is directed first of all against the notion of generic purity that tends to insinuate itself into prescriptive taxonomies of genre, and secondly against the naïve idea that we need to fit texts into one or another generic pigeonhole. In fact, no story is so simple that it uses only one generic code, so that we might more usefully think about the science fictional elements in a story rather than worry about whether we can identify it as a thing called science fiction.

The last point I want to make here has to do with the economy of genres. In calling our attention to an economy of genres within a given text, Frow is saying that we should be alert to the dynamic interaction taking place between its different generic elements or strategies. The concept of an 'economy' also means, however, that there is a variety of choices available to writers, publishers, and consumers of fiction, and there are different values attached to those choices. In order to flesh out this notion of the economy of genres as a field of value-bearing choices I am going to call upon the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of the field of cultural production.

Bourdieu says that the field of cultural production is constituted by the choices people make, not by a set of logical possibilities prior to the act of choosing. The act of making choices establishes positions relative to other acts of choosing, which is why Bourdieu writes not of choices but of positions and position-taking. Bourdieu theorizes that these positions can be mapped according to two different axes of value: one measuring economic capital, and the other measuring what he calls symbolic or cultural capital. This second axis has to do basically with prestige. Old things tend to carry higher prestige, more cultural capital, than new things. Institutional recognition, which Bourdieu calls consecration, confers cultural capital on those practices or people that it recognizes. High concentrations of cultural capital are often associated with other forms of political power or wealth, but not inevitably. He points out that there is often, paradoxically, an inverse relationship between economic and cultural capital in modern society, meaning that artists who disdain economic goals and produce works aimed solely at gaining the recognition and approval of other artists tend to be taken more se-

riously, that is, they tend to reap higher cultural capital, than artists who are commercially successful.

Andrew Milner, in a recent essay, performed the experiment of using Bourdieu's analysis of the French 19th century field of cultural production as a template for analyzing the history and contemporary status of science fiction, with interesting and informative results. Perhaps the most important one is that science fiction does not occupy any single position in the field. On the contrary, different practices and groups of practitioners occupy positions spread across the entire field, and this has been true throughout the history of the genre. These groups and practices are not evenly distributed throughout the field of cultural production by any means, but Milner's analysis thoroughly undermines any sense that science fiction can be neatly pigeonholed.

I would like to make two further points about the way science fiction fits into the contemporary economy of genres and field of cultural production. The first is that the two genre systems that I discussed earlier, the classical one and the mass cultural system, occupy opposite ends of the spectrum when it comes to cultural capital. The classical system is old, thoroughly consecrated by institutional practices, thoroughly identified with the practices of scholarship, criticism, publication and performance in our society's richest and most prestigious institutional settings – universities, museums, national theaters, and the like. The mass cultural genre system, in contrast, is relatively new. University courses on science fiction or detective fiction are not as rare as they used to be – the mass cultural genre system is getting older and gathering legitimacy as an object of academic study – but by and large mass cultural genres are identified with commercial production rather than with institutional prestige. Science fiction writers who achieve a high degree of institutional recognition tend to see their work pulled away from the mass cultural genre system towards the classical one, so that one often hears works like George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* treated as satire rather than as science fiction. One way to understand the project of Darko Suvin's genre theory is that Suvin was trying to carve a space for science fiction within the institutionally consecrated terrain of 'literature.' This tension between the high cultural capital attached to the classical genre system and the commercial vitality of the modern system of narrative genres is one that has an ongoing effect on attempts to understand "What is SF," and occasionally it leads to conversations where the participants are almost literally speaking two entirely different languages.

My second point is that the different groups of people who make choices about science fiction, and who therefore construct and constantly reconstruct the shape and the boundaries and the significance of the genre, can be mapped at least roughly onto positions in Bourdieu's field of cultural production. There are

several different communities of practice with, so to speak, distinctively different profiles that can be correlated to the four quadrants formed by the intersection of Bourdieu's two axes of value: high economic capital and high cultural capital; high economic capital and low cultural capital; low economic capital and high cultural capital; low economic capital and low cultural capital. Those with the highest combination of economic wealth and cultural capital are by and large institutions – particularly the higher education system, the universities. The combination of a high concentration of economic capital with little cultural prestige describes those who operate in and for the mass market, and especially the entertainment industry – most prominently in the high stakes enterprise of making blockbuster films. There is a very significant group that enjoys high cultural prestige but not much economic power – the 'serious' artists I mentioned earlier, but also intellectuals in general, such as university professors. Most criticism and scholarship of science fiction comes from this group. Finally, the combination of low economic capital and low cultural capital describes the profile of fan culture, and indeed the study of fan culture and fan fiction is a growing area of science fiction studies.

I said at the outset that the best use of answers is often to generate new questions. I think that the answers I have ventured to the question, "What is SF?", confirm this. For the questions that I hope to have opened up, in response to that initial one, are: Who cares? Why do they care? What is at stake? What difference does it make, and to whom? I think these questions guide us away from mere taxonomy and toward the vital processes of communication that activate the phenomenon of genre to produce, distribute, consume, and study 'SF'.

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