Marxism, Critical Utopia, and Science Fiction

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Abstract

In this paper we use the Marxist approach to cultural production to discuss key concepts of the science fiction genre, namely, "critical utopia" and "cognitive estrangement," which reveal new ways of analyzing human society and provide new sources for the development of social consciousness and political awareness. We specially reference Marxist-feminist science fiction writers, whose avant-garde work abstained from gender separatism, revising many conventional ideas about human subjectivity and human embodiment. Finally, we show why Marxism claims to be the theoretical method in most science fiction criticism.

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Introduction

After the 1960s, cultural life has been increasingly marked by criticisms of the status quo from imaginary standpoints. Science fiction became one of the privileged instruments of this current of thought.

In this paper we study the conceptual framework of the science fiction genre, in which the imagined conditions and capabilities encourage new ways of thinking about human society and provide new sources for resisting oppression, while, at the same time, develop social consciousness and political awareness.

We will show how the concept of "critical utopia" derives from certain ideas important in the tradition of Marxism that analyzed culture as an aspect of class-domination in order to construct a disciplined resisting consciousness, and how utopia and cognitive estrangement have been reconceived to signify an emancipatory mode of thought that keeps alive the hope for social justice and equality.

This is achieved by examining two main concerns of Marxist cultural theory: the appearance and development of specific forms of production and ideology critique, i.e., how a particular cultural work expresses or resists the ideological mechanisms of the bourgeois state.

Marxist cultural theory and practice

The Marxist approach to cultural production is characterized by certain key concepts that theorize the historically specific material articulations of production and consumption. The term "mode of production" refers to a specific organization of the system of production which in turn generates specific forms of social relations out of which specific forms of cultural production arise. Of the four modes of production identified by Marx, capitalism is the one connected to the discussion of science fiction because of the unprecedented development of science and technology from the early seventeenth century to the present time.

Capitalism is characterized by the ways in which the surplus value of labor is appropriated as profit by the owners of the means of production.

From the standpoint of Marxist cultural theory, three concepts are especially noteworthy:

(a) Alienation results from the fact that workers cannot afford and therefore cannot enjoy the very goods and services they produce, nor do they own the resources needed for production. The workers lose control of the goods they produce.

(b) Reification describes the practice of equating human relationships with relations among commodities. This concept is better understood if one refers to commodification (i.e., the social valorization of consumption), which is especially characterized by the commodity fetishism. The latter refers to the ideological mystification of imagining that things have a life of their own rather being the products of human labor.

(c) The irresolvable material antagonisms existing between capitalists and the workers result in class struggle, which is replicated (or reflected) in the content and the forms of cultural practices, as exemplified by such categories as "popular culture" and "high art."

Marxist cultural theory employs two basic methodological practices:

(a) Historicization which insists that only by the analysis of practices at specific historical periods in cultures can one fully understand their meaning and significance. In the context of this methodology, Marxist cultural theory challenges the prevailing bourgeois idealist theory of interpretation which separates "true art" from "popular culture" and characterizes the former as bearing transcendent, universal value.

(b) Critical thinking reflects upon its own premises, insists upon supporting evidence, and recognizes the complexities of ideology generated by the particular social relations inherent in the specific mode of production.

With these basic theoretical and methodological considerations in mind, we can see how Marxist theorists apply them to the analysis of cultural production in general, and the analysis of science fiction in particular.

Georg Lukacs's *The Theory of the Novel* (1916), while not specifically Marxist, is the first important theoretical work of the early twentieth century devoted to the analysis of cultural production. Lukacs established the basis for linking particular forms of fiction, such as realism, to specific historical eras, and

demonstrated the possibilities for theoretical analysis of culture. Subsequent studies by others refined the connections of historical period to form and demonstrated how culture production replicates or challenges ideology.

The Frankfurt School members Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer identified, in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), what they termed as "culture industry," i.e., forms of mass-cultural production which simultaneously generated profits for capitalists while infusing political and social passivity.

Countering this position, Raymond Williams, especially in his *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (1960), established the basis for what became later known as "cultural materialism" by arguing for the resistive and liberatory possibilities of mass culture. In the latter period it was Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1981) and *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) which offered new strategies for historicizing cultural production in relation to the stages of capitalism over the past two centuries.

Undoubtedly, Fredric Jameson is considered to be the most influential Marxist literary (and specifically science fiction) critic since the early 1970s. According to Jameson, science fiction, as cultural form, could be political also, which is to say critical and even subversive (Jameson, 2005, pp. xii-xv). Jameson's essays on such authors as Philip K. Dick, Ursula K. Le Guin, McIntyre, Kim Stanley Robinson, and William Gibson, focusing on topics such as utopian theory, globalization, postmodernism, class struggle, and generic historicity, are collected in his monumental work *Archaeologies of the Future; The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005) . This collection continues Jameson's longstanding and perhaps most important theoretical contribution, that of "cognitive mapping" as a strategy for historicizing and understanding the otherwise unrepresentable operations and effects of multinational capitalism (Skordoulis, 2018b). Understood as a countermeasure to the incapacitating operations of ideology, "cognitive mapping" is the process of conceptualizing an intellectual form which can embrace "the totality of social relations on a global scale" (Jameson, 2005, p. 283).

Jameson regularly asserts that science fiction in general is precisely a privileged representational apparatus, and in particular that Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (2003) "sends back more reliable information about the contemporary

than an exhausted realism" and thus maps "the new geopolitical Imaginary" (Jameson, 2005, pp. 384–385).

As this brief survey indicates, Marxist theorization of cultural production achieved an impressive sophistication. Marxist theory, far from declining in the post-Soviet era, has become ever more pertinent, being the best-suited conceptual model for analyzing the rapid developments of the capitalist world order and the imminent consequences that threaten humanity's future.

Marxist criticism and science fiction

Despite the diversity among the advocates of this cultural movement, they shared a powerful desire to free the world of poverty, racism, sexual repression, and economic exploitation, all of which had been theorized as necessary aspects of capitalism. The cultural life was increasingly marked by criticisms of the status quo from imaginary standpoints, where the problems of the present were resolved, and science fiction became one of the privileged instruments of this current of thought.

The main development of science fiction theory took place in 1973 when Darco Suvin and R.D. Mullen founded *Science Fiction Studies,* which was to become the primary venue for neo-Marxist criticism of science fiction. The journal became the home for a group of Marxists who agreed on certain premises about "utopia." Although it would be misleading to speak of a *Science Fiction Studies* "school," most Marxist theorists of science fiction elaborated the concept of "critical utopia" (as it was named by T. Moylan) as the central core concept of the science fiction imagination, in which the imagined conditions and capabilities encourage new ways of thinking about human society, or provide new sources of strength for resisting oppression, while, at the same time, bringing about social consciousness and political awareness (Moylan, 1982).

The term "critical utopia" derives from certain ideas important in the tradition of critical Marxism[3] that analyzed culture as an aspect of class domination in order to construct a disciplined resisting consciousness. These thinkers reconceived utopia to signify an emancipatory mode of thought that keeps alive the hope for social justice and equality.

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[3] "Critical Marxism" has been developed by thinkers such as Adorno, Horkheimer, Sartre, Lefebvre, Marcuse; it represents a substantial current of "Western Marxism" and has often been equated with Hegelian Marxism as its theory was more dialectical than materialist (Skordoulis, 2018a).

Utopia has always been a political issue, but just as the literary value of the form is subject to permanent doubt, its political status is ambiguous. The relationship between utopia and the political, as well as questions about the practical-political value of utopian thinking and the political identification between socialism and utopia, continue to be unresolved topics today. The fundamental dynamic of any utopian politics will always lie at realizing a social system radically different from this one.

In their effort to define science fiction and to distinguish it from the "fantasy" literary genre,[4] Marxist critics of science fiction associate the genre with social critique. Darko Suvin introduced a number of concepts that remain central in science fiction criticism: "cognitive estrangement," "novum," and science fiction's genetic link with utopia. Suvin, in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979), derived the concept of cognitive estrangement from Russian Formalism's notion of *ostranenie* and Bertolt Brecht's closely related (but Marx-inflected) notion of the estrangement effect. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* is a structuralist attempt to distinguish the genre of science fiction writing from other forms of fiction. As Fredric Jameson points out in *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), this is a rather exclusive definition, which emphasizes the rational scientific dimension of science fiction and rigorously excludes the kinds of flights of fancy associated with fantasy fiction. For Suvin, the key to cognitive estrangement is the presence in a story or novel of what he calls a "novum," that is, a device or machine that is absolutely new and whose presence compels us to imagine a different way of conceiving our world (*The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction*).

The estranging novelties that characterize the science fiction genre correspond precisely to the concept of novum as conceived by Ernst Bloch, which is a *radical* novelty able to reconstitute the entire surrounding world and thus to create a new world (Freedman, 2000, p. 69; Suvin, 1975, 1978). C. Freedman goes further, introducing the idea that science fiction texts can be made valid by thinking not in terms of real cognition but as "cognition effect"— a rhetorical construction that evokes the sense of true cognition. As he states, "cognition effect, the crucial term for

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[4] This effort was first expressed in the symposium "Change, SF, and Marxism: Open or Closed Universes?" (*Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 1:2, 1973; vol. 1:3, 1974), and later in the symposium "Marxism and Fantasy, Research in Critical Marxist Theory" (*Historical Materialism*, vol. 10:4, 2002; *Socialism and Democracy*, vol. 20:3, 2006).

generic discrimination is not any epistemological judgment external to the text … but rather … the attitude of the text itself to the kind of estrangement being performed" (Freedman, 2000, p. 18).

The "estrangement" of traditional science fiction is based on extrapolation, and its *impossible* is therefore more exactly *not-yet-possible* (Freedman, 2000, pp. 64–69). This is not an abstract aesthetic debate. The form of the impossible in science fiction is compatible with Marxist dialectics. As Gramsci points out, "Possibility is not reality: but it is in itself a reality. Whether a man can or cannot do a thing has its importance in evaluating what is done in reality" (Mieville, 2006).

But "what is actually possible" is only partly predetermined. After all, human beings produce their own life in the same way as they make their own history. The active dimension of our anthropological specificity therefore creates a margin, a transitional zone, between what is materially, socially, and historically possible and what is materially, socially, and historically impossible. This mediation encompasses all those changes in nature and society which are already materially possible, but whose actual realization depends on a definite, specific human praxis, which does not arise automatically or simultaneously out of that material possibility.

So, the cognitive rationality of science fiction allows utopia to emerge as genuinely critical and transformative. In this way, the dynamic of science fiction can on one level be identified with the hope principle itself (Freedman, 2002; Mandel, 2002).

A different path was taken by Fredric Jameson, who approached science fiction in terms of the problematic of "generic discontinuities" (Jameson, 1973, 1975) and concentrated on the concept of "negative totality," which, in his usage, came to stand as the dialectical opposite of utopia. In his most influential essay in science fiction theory, "Progress versus Utopia, or, Can We Imagine the Future?" (1982), Jameson argued that science fictions are fantastic displacements of the present's ideological contradictions into the future.

Marxist feminist science fiction
Marxist feminists, since the end of nineteenth century, have been involved in the reorganization of social and community life and the abolition of gender differences along with class inequalities. Their theoretical contribution in enriching

Marxist theory cannot be ignored, and enjoys a prominent position in the main body of Marxism (Katsiampoura, 2015).

By the end of the twentieth century, the materialist critiques of socialist feminists have posed new challenges to cultural theory and in particular to the reading practices of science fiction. Particularly in the 1970s, feminist utopian fiction focused strongly upon the role played by gender in the process of creating a better society and abstained from the notion of gender separatism. A notable exception to the latter trend are such works as Ursula LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and *The Dispossessed* (1974), Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), which became landmarks in the revival of utopian imagination (Moylan, 1986, pp. 57–61).

All these novels propose societies in which men and women coexist, with of course drastic changes in the economies of power and gender, and express the authors' vision of the perfect society (LeGuin, 1975). As Joanna Russ observed, "These utopias are not embodiments of universal human values, but are reactive, that is, they supply in fiction what their authors believe society … and/or women lack in the here-and-now. The positive values stressed in the stories can reveal to us what, in the authors' eyes, is wrong with our own society" (Russ, 1980).

The tendency to posit "culture" and "nature" as opposed processes is apparent in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, in which the awareness of human integration into a broader ecological system displayed a more complex vision of utopia than the one seen in *The Dispossessed.* All of these novels opposed discordances such as loneliness and togetherness, fragmentation and connection, and a number of others, all rooted in the dichotomy between Self and Other (Lensing, 2006).

The cyber-theorists Donna Haraway and Katherine Hayles, who are concerned with how developments in contemporary science and technology and advances in reproductive and communications technologies are shaping our lives, read science fiction texts as "thought experiments" specifically relevant for the ways in which they explore the influence of science and technology on the lives of human individuals.

In 1985, Donna Haraway published her influential *Manifesto for Cyborgs*, a powerful socialist-feminist examination of techno-culture as an unavoidable influence on contemporary life in the West. Haraway's world picture is explicitly derived from science fiction, from which she inherited the notion of cyborg as a positive agent of

historical transformation. Since then, the "figure" of the cyborg has become a privileged theoretical representation in Marxist-feminist cultural studies of science and technology.

For Haraway, feminist science fiction writers are "theorists for cyborgs," and science fiction itself is a particularly valuable arena within which to consider how science and technology are revising many conventional ideas about human subjectivity and human embodiment (Csicsery-Ronay, 2003a; Hollinger, 2003). In Haraway's terms, "The cyborgs populating feminist science fiction make very problematic the statuses of man or woman, human, artifact, member of a race, individual identity, or body" (Haraway, 1991, p. 148).

Science fiction articulates and explores the theoretical propositions and arguments of Marxist feminists through its narratives in the ongoing dialectical relationship between abstraction and concretization. The resulting stories incorporate these arguments into the lives and actions of imagined human subjects in imaginary worlds, subjecting them to detailed fictional examination (Hollinger, 2003, p. 129).

In LeGuin's terms, such stories are "thought experiments whose purpose is not to predict the future … but to describe reality, the present world" (LeGuin, 1976). Like other critical discourses, these novels work to create a critical distance between observer and observed, to defamiliarize certain taken-for-granted aspects of ordinary human reality, "denaturalizing" situation of historical inequity and oppression that otherwise may appear inevitable to us, if indeed we notice them at all (Hollinger, 2003, p. 131).

And therefore…

Science fiction and utopian fiction have been concerned with imagining progressive alternatives to the status quo, often implying critiques of contemporary conditions or possible future outcomes of current social trends. Science fiction imagines change in terms of the whole human species, and these changes are often the results of scientific discoveries and inventions that are applied by human beings to their own social evolution. These are also the concerns of Marxist utopia and social imagination (Csicsery-Ronay, 2003a, 2003b; Freedman, 2006).

Marxist theory has played an important role in science fiction criticism. For at least several decades, there has been a lively and substantial body of Marxist science fiction criticism, adopted by feminism, race-criticism, and cultural studies. The major

critics and authors in the genre have been avowed adherents of Marxism. Science fiction and the closely related genre of utopian fiction have affinities with socialist thought in general and Marxist thought in particular. Indeed, Marxism has a considerable claim to being the theoretical method in most science fiction criticism of enduring value.

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