

## **“SOMETHING OF A GRAIL QUEST”: DEFINING AND TRACING SCIENCE FICTION**

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*Abstract: This essay represents a theoretical attempt to clarify the definition and evolution of science fiction, given that this genre continues to puzzle theoreticians, practitioners and simple consumers, being complex but also crude, hybridizing, changing forms and concepts, crossing boundaries and selling extremely well.*

*Keywords: ‘novum’, cognition, estrangement, evolution, science fiction.*

When talking about science fiction, most people think of paperback volumes with black or brightly coloured covers, surrealistic images or movies full of special effects. Though different in form, all of them are meant to fit a specific pattern which involves imaginative plots, futuristic societies, bizarre landscapes, time and space travel, highly sophisticated technologies, extra-terrestrial creatures, superheroes, mad scientists and even apocalypses. All these clichés, however, seem not enough to deepen our understanding regarding science fiction, its significance and value. In fact, the attempt to define science fiction proves to be a real challenge, which triggers fiery debates among theoreticians and practitioners, and continues to be, just like Gary K Wolfe claims, “something of a Grail quest” (40). The lack of consensus in defining science fiction is not generated by its key points but rather by the fact that “SF itself is a wide-ranging, multivalent and endlessly cross-fertilising cultural idiom” and therefore, very difficult to encapsulate (Roberts 2006: 2). Conceptually, it undergoes continuous changes, being deeply influenced by the socio-political, technological and ideological transformations of the time. It constantly reinvents its forms by hybridisation and adaptation becoming a sort of a chameleonic genre, which never ceases to surprise its public. Likewise, it evolves with such speed, that there is no wonder when Tom Shippey ironically states: “SF changes while you are trying to define it” (qtd in Latham 141). The worst of all is that many followers of the genre are content with statements which are either too wide: “Science fiction...is the fiction of ideas” (James Gunn, qtd in Hamilton 4); too simplistic: “Science fiction is what you find on the shelves in the library marked science fiction” (George Hay, qtd in Lundwall 1); tautological: “Science fiction is what we point to when we say it.” (Damon Knight, qtd in Rogers 5), infamous: “Science fiction is what I say it is” (John W.

Campbell, qtd in Gunn 52) or extremely surprising: “Science fiction doesn't exist” (Brian W. Aldiss qtd in Lundwall 1).

The term ‘science fiction’ is nonetheless, problematic and hardly helpful. It was first employed by William Willson in his 1851 study, *A Little Earnest Book upon a Great Old Subject*, to define a kind of literature “in which the revealed truths of science may be given, interwoven with a pleasing story which may itself be poetical and true – thus circulating a knowledge of the Poetry of Science clothed in a grab of Poetry of Life” (qtd in James 4). Yet, the term remained in the shadows up until late 1920s when the pulp-magazine editors, Hugo Gernsback and Jahn Campbell, popularized and used it in relation to works previously labelled as “scientific romance” (H. G. Wells, qtd in Bergonzi 5), “merveilleux scientifique” (J.H. Rosny Aîné, qtd in Mullen 107), “voyages extraordinaires” (J. Verne, qtd in Smyth 30), “ratiocination” (E.A. Poe, qtd in Schubert 4) or “scientification” (Hugo Gernsback, qtd in Westfahl 208). Over time, the term has been abbreviated as “SF” and sometimes “SF”, and lead to certain confusions, as its initials can also stand for “space fiction”, “science fantasy”, “speculative fiction”, ‘structural fabulation’, ‘surfiction’, ‘specular feminism’ and why not ‘speculative fascism’ (Broderick, 3). To complicate things even more, in 1954, under Forrest J Ackerman’s influence, the term acquired a new abbreviation – “sci-fi” or “hi-fi”, which was enthusiastically embraced by mass media but deeply criticised by theoreticians who saw it as an “odious” name denoting “junk sf” (Broderick 3).

However, “what is in a name?” we may ask ourselves in a Shakespearean manner (28). Those who did venture to explore the meaning of science fiction, focused mainly on literature and took into consideration its stylistic elements (genre), plot elements (imagination), mode and mythic elements as well as its cultural and commercial implications. Thus, important writers such as Isaac Asimov defined science fiction as “a branch of literature which deals with the reaction of human beings to changes in science and technology” (35). Others, like Ray Bradbury, underlined its broad meaning saying that: “science fiction is the one field that reached out and embraced every sector of the human imagination, every endeavour, every idea, every technological development, and every dream” (3). There are also theoreticians who saw science fiction not as a “genre” or “field” but rather as a “mode”. In this sense, Northrop Frye said that [science fiction] was “a mode of romance with a strong inherent tendency towards myth” (49). Finally, many others regarded it as a form of popular entertainment, a vast culture (completed with its Klingon language), a “self-perpetuating commercial power-structure”, or simply, “a shelving aid” (qtd Atwood 2). This multitude of perspectives proves that science fiction is indeed a broad concept with wide applications but it also hinders the process of providing a satisfactory definition.

In his 1988 study, *Positions and Suppositions in Science Fiction*, Professor Darko Suvin proposed one of the most representative definitions of science fiction, describing it as “the verbal construct whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (37). Such a ‘verbal construction’ is ‘imaginative’ and takes the reader beyond the ‘empirical environment’ he knows. Accuracy and verisimilitude, attributes of reality or realism are here corrupted or simply reinvented. The reader is, as Suvin suggests while borrowing Brecht’s term, gradually ‘estranged’ or ‘alienated’ from his own reality and persuaded to trust the author’s depictions and arguments. This process must be based on ‘cognition’, a term referring to reasoning, “logic implications” and the “constraints of science” (Roberts, 2000: 8). Precise descriptions, plausible scientific events and well established cause-effect relations have to be perfectly orchestrated and function in a

convincing way though they might have nothing in common with reality itself. For example, the existence of a colony on planet Mars can be described in great detail starting from the technologies used to maintain life there, to the ways in which the inhabitants spend their time. Everything may seem plausible and realistic and the reader can be persuaded to believe (at least for some moments) that such a world truly exists. The reality of the text is, nonetheless, quite far from that of the reader's – one may even say a few years light away. The intervention of “cognition” limits the “estrangement”. Thus, far from reality, science fiction texts do not go beyond the logical understanding. Supernatural interventions or magical elements have no place here. Superheroes astonish readers due to their unbelievable powers but there is always a pertinent explanation for their existence. They are either the result of man-created experiments, of an encounter with superior civilisations or they are actually aliens living on Earth. Spiderman, the Marvel Comics character, can climb skyscrapers and produce webs from his wrists, only because his alter ego, Peter Parker, was bitten by a tiny genetically engineered spider. The Fantastic Four, Reed Richards, Ben Grimm, Sue Storm, and her brother Johnny, acquire their superpowers after their rocket is bombarded by mysterious cosmic rays. Superman, the hero created by writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster, is actually an alien coming from planet Krypton, who flies around, fights criminals and saves the world. On the other hand, vampires like Bram Stoker's Dracula or Stephenie Meyer's Edward Cullen, werewolves like J. R. R. Tolkien's Draugluin or J. K. Rowling's Remus Lupin, and many other monster-like creatures and ghosts are nothing else but products of mythology and folklore, and work better under the umbrella term of fantasy rather than that of science fiction. Furthermore, characters such as the protagonists of Patrick Süskind's *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* (1985) or Franz Kafka's *Metamorphoses* (1915), who have inexplicable powers or mysteriously change their body form, are not part of science fiction either. They function as symbols which convey the authors' views regarding human contingency, rationality, individuality, purpose, fragility or alienation. Of course, there can be characters and plots which combine science, mythology and symbolism. Such hybrids can, for instance, be called science fantasy, and show that simultaneously “the improbable [can be] made possible [and] the impossible [can be] made probable” (Rod Serling, qtd in Haslam 13). Yet, this analysis focuses on the general patterns rather than on the exceptions of the genre.

Science fiction works need, just like Adam Roberts underlines, “material, physical rationalisation, rather than a supernatural or arbitrary one”; in short, they need “cognitive estrangement” (2006: 5-8). The difference between the reality of the texts and that of the author's is triggered by a series of crucial elements such as: scientific discoveries and experiments, highly sophisticated technologies, space or time travel, genetically engineered or extra-terrestrial creatures and extreme environmental changes. These elements are part of the fictional mechanism proposed by the author and willingly accepted by the reader. Suvin calls them ‘novum’ (a Latin word meaning “new” or “new thing”) and claims that “SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional ‘novum’ ... validated by cognitive logic” (1979: 63). The term ‘hegemony’ is taken from Karl Marx and stresses that power should be maintained through means of persuasion rather than direct force. In other words, the author has to convince the reader of the existence and veracity of the ‘novum’ in a subtle rather than an ostentatious manner. The ‘novum’ can exist only by “cognitive logic” or rational explanations that involve scientific processes or discoveries. Without these attributes a story cannot be qualified as science fiction.

Robert Scholes, an influential American literary critic and theorist, was more interested to highlight the specific traits of science fiction. In his “Structural Fabulation”

(1975), Scholes analyses the metaphors that conceive science fiction. In his view, ‘fabulation’ represents any “fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way” (2). ‘Fabulation’ becomes a broad term which covers science fiction, fantasy and other imaginative works marked by ‘discontinuity’, or ‘novum’, in Suvinian terms, as well as constancy. These texts venture beyond the reader’s reality but also come back to confront it. The main focus of the ‘structural fabulation’ lies not on science itself but rather, on the “fictional exploration of human situations made perceptible by the implications of recent science” (Scholes 8). The insightful author and editor Damian Broderick continues Suvin’s and Scholes’s theoretical quests and offers a complex definition of science fiction:

Sf is that species of storytelling native to a culture undergoing the epistemic changes implicated in the rise and supersession of technical– industrial modes of production, distribution, consumption and disposal. It is marked by (i) metaphoric strategies and metonymic tactics, (ii) the foregrounding of icons and interpretative schemata from a collectively constituted generic ‘mega-text’ and the concomitant deemphasis of ‘fine writing’ and characterisation, and (iii) certain priorities more often found in scientific and postmodern texts than in literary models: specifically, attention to the object in preference to the subject. (Broderick 155)

Broderick highlights the features of the pseudo-scientific discourse which become central to almost all SF texts. The “metaphoric strategies and metonymic tactics” help science fiction writers convey either the whole world or just part of it into a fictional one. Broderick claims that there are numerous SF “icons” and “interpretative schemata” similar to the Suvinian ‘novum’ or the Scholesian ‘discontinuity’ which turn science fiction into a representative literary genre. Through repetition, these ‘icons’ help create a ‘mega-text’ that corresponds to all SF books, films, shows, games etc. The mega text requires, however, “certain priorities”. According to Broderick, Sf texts do not focus on insightful experimental styles, elaborate descriptions or detailed characterisations which might reveal complicated human psychologies. Instead they pay more attention to “the object in preference to the subject” (155). The narrative, the feeling of estrangement and the alienation have priority. The characters and the scenario become just like Jones said: “pieces of equipment” (5).

Tracing the roots of science fiction and exploring its evolution can help clarify numerous aspects regarding this genre, though such a complex attempt can prove to be extremely difficult. Historians of the genre have established not one but four possible evolutionary paths of science fiction. Enthusiasts have tried to underline its direct lineage with the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh* written around 2000 BC, or other non-realistic passages of various sacred texts as well as myths, legends, folklore and fables. Works such as Cicero’s *Somnium Scipionis* (‘The Dream of Scipio’, 51 BC), Plutarch’s *kuklô tês selênês* (‘The Circle of the Moon’, c. AD 80), Lucian of Samos’s *Alêthês Historia* (‘The True History’, c. AD 170) or poet Ludovico Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* (‘Mad Roland’, 1534) which describe trips to the Moon, are also included, although they combine scientific theories with the supernatural. This attempt is praiseworthy, but as we have previously established using Suvin’s definition, science fiction is based on “cognitive logic”, factual predictions or experimental based understandings, thus the above stories can hardly be considered science fiction. Contemporary myths produced by science itself, such as the Big Bang and the “singularity” that preceded it cannot enter this category either (Atwood 54).

Another path is promoted by theoreticians such as Adam Roberts, who propose the year 1600 and the spread of Nicolaus Copernicus’s theories about the heliocentric cosmos, as the



birth period of science fiction. The scientific discoveries of the time put an end to the “pure and religious realm” based on geocentrism and the idea that only humans were subject to change and corruption, and offered writers new ways of narrative exploration (Roberts, 2000: 39). In this context, German astronomer, Johann Kepler’s *Somnium, sive Astronomia Lunaris* (‘A Dream, or Lunar Astronomy’) written in 1608 but published in 1934, can be seen as the first work entitled to be called Sf. The book includes witchcraft and daemons but it also provides a detailed description of our planet, seen from outside space, the Moon’s revolution and the temperature changes on its surface. Kepler’s *Somnium* opened the path to other stories regarding space travels and unknown worlds such as William Godwin’s *The Man in the Moon* (1638), Eberhard Christian Kindermann’s *Die geschwinde Reise auf dem Luft-Schiff nach der Oberen Welt, welche jüngsthin fünf Personen angestellt* (‘The rapid journey by airship to the upper world, recently taken by five people’, 1744). Ludvig Holberg’s *Nikolai Klimi iter subterraneum*, ‘Nikolai Klim’s Journey beneath the Earth’, 1741, or the famous Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726). Though barely visible, there were also SF books written by women such as Marie-Anne de Roumier’s *Les Voyages de Milord Ceton dans les sept Planettes* ‘The Voyages of Lord Ceton in the Seven Planets’ (1765).

A third starting point of science fiction is identified by critic Brian Aldiss with the publication of Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein* (1818). The novel depicts a mad scientist who plays God and brings to life - throughout electric devices and lightning - an artificial entity made out of pieces of human corpses. Abandoned by its creator, who was horrified by his final product, the “monster” becomes a destructive force. Though, frequently criticised for his choice, Aldiss highlighted that:

*perhaps the quest for the First SF Novel, like the first flower of spring, is chimerical. But the period where we should expect to look for such a blossoming is during the Industrial Revolution and perhaps just after the Napoleonic Wars, when changes accelerated by industry and war have begun to bite, with the resultant sense of isolation of the individual from and in society.(80)*

The eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries marked a great development in the evolution of this literary genre. Its so-called fathers, Edgar A. Poe (1809 –1849), Jules Verne (1828-1905) and H. G. Wells (1866-1946), fascinated but also terrified the readership with their unusual writings. Due to “ratiocination”, or the process of exact thinking, American writer, E. A. Poe’s corpus is surrounded by a science-fictional aura. Likewise, his works such as *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) or *Mellonta Tauta* (1849) gain much more by being read as SF. French playwright and novelist, Jules Verne delighted his readership with the “voyages extraordinaires”. His books, *Voyage au centre de la terre* (‘Voyage to the Centre of the Earth’, 1864), *20,000 lieues sous les mers* (‘Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea’, 1872) or *De la terre à la lune* (‘From the Earth to the Moon’, 1865) gave them “a sense of coming very close to but never toppling over the edge of the known” (Clute and Nicholls 1276). His British contemporary, H.G. Wells, also marked profoundly the emergence of the modern science fiction novel. His famous book *The War of the Worlds* (1898) reveals “the interlinked beauties of the familiar and the strange” (Roberts 47) and it shows what it feels like to be a world force such as the British Empire was and to be invaded by the Martians who were scientifically more evolved. Well’s clash of civilisations opened the way for many other debates regarding Otherness and the problems of the Others.

Finally, the last birth moment of science fiction is identified in the early twentieth century together with the publication of Hugo Gernsback’s magazine “Amazing Stories”

(1926) and his invention of the term “scientification”, by which he understood: “a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic” (Clute and Nicholls 311–314). Soon, however, he replaced “scientification” with William Willson’s more euphonious creation, “science fiction”, and promoted it as “an important factor in making the world a better place to live in” (James 8–9). His rival, John W. Campbell, the editor of “Astounding Science Fiction”, also promoted the term and believed that the genre should not be only about inventions and ideas but also about the ways in which people were shaped by them. As a result, there appeared numerous works among such as: Edgar Rice Burroughs’s *The Moon Maid* (1926) or Philip Nowlan’s *Armageddon 2419 AD* (1928), which depict a world in chaos dominated either by evil Communist-like “Kalkars” who take over the Moon and the Earth or by Russian Soviets and Mongolians who conquer Europe and targeted the USA. Nevertheless, the interest in distant future, interplanetary war, battle cruisers and galactic domination continued to flourish and Edward E. “Doc” Smith’s *Space Opera* initiated in 1928 stands as a clear proof.

The period 1938s and 1946s is usually perceived by fans and critics as the “Golden Age” in SF and is marked by talented authors such as Isaac Asimov, Clifford Simak, Jack Williamson, L. Sprague De Camp, Theodore Sturgeon, Robert Heinlein and A. E. Van Vogt. Asimov’s *Foundation* series published from 1942 to 1993 remains one a “landmark” in science fiction winning numerous prizes including a HUGO for 1965 as Best All-Time Series (Clute 135). The following decade brought a “boom” of the genre in America. As “the worries about the future” increased so did the number of SF works and sales (James 84). Books such as Jack Finney’s *Body Snatcher* (1955) which explored people’s constant fear of invasion or nuclear war became more and more numerous. According to John Huntington, however, it was not until a decade later that SF became a popular genre that went mass publishing and international distribution (2). Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) or Herbert’s *Dune* (1965) are two of the most representative titles of this period. Over time these books have fascinated the public by combining traditional science fiction characteristics with mysticism, prophecies and Messianic figures.

In the 1970s, along with the increased interest in producing SF works, there also emerged a reaction against the traditional conventions of pulp science fiction, called the ‘New Wave’. The term was the translation of the French ‘nouvelle vague’ and initially referred to experimental cinema. P. Schuyler Miller began to employ it in reference to the London magazine “New Worlds”, and its collaborators, J. G. Ballard, Brian Aldiss, John Brunner and E C Tubb who developed passionate, original styles. A few American writers, such as Thomas M. Disch, John Sladek and Samuel R. Delany, were also influenced by this movement, though they rejected its label. The followers of the New Wave considered themselves as being part of an avant-garde and pleaded for radical changes of the genre, experimentation, both in form and in content, and ‘literary’ or artistic sensibility. They turned, as J. G. Ballard states, “[their] back on space, on interstellar travel, extra-terrestrial life forms, (and) galactic wars” and produced ‘soft’ rather than ‘hard’ science fiction (qtd. Landon 151). Their focus was no more on “the adventurer, the inventor, the engineer, or the scientist, but on the average citizen” (qtd. Gunn 216). Exceptions such as Herbert’s 1965 novel, *Dune*, which described highly technologized worlds, continued to exist, but the splitting was there to stay.

The 1970s and spread of the Feminist ideas, the civil rights movement, the New Left, the gay and lesbian marches, the anti-war campaign and the ecologist demonstrations had strong echoes within the SF realm, transforming it into an ideal space for speculations upon possible societies and a variety of Others. The world was no longer threatened by an outer-

space danger but rather by an inner one generated by the cracks of the social system. Following this trend, numerous authors such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Marge Piercy, Doris Lessing or Margaret Atwood have captivated public's attention with their novels which speculate upon contemporary fears and Self-alienation.

Throughout the following decades the extraordinary development of cybernetics rejuvenated authors and readers' interest in technologies and innovation and lead to the emergence of a new movement called Cyberpunk, after Bruce Bethke's 1983 story. The movement tried to bring together the hard and soft parts of science fiction. Cyberpunk works, such as the famous *Neuromancer* (1984), written by William Gibson, depict future societies where industrial or political blocs achieve global power, informational networks are frequently hijacked, people modify their bodies and minds through drugs and biological engineering or find refuge in virtual realities projecting their "disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix" (Williams 253). Additionally, the general atmosphere of Cyberpunk books is dominated by juvenile energy, destructive sexuality, aggressiveness, street wisdom and a powerful sense of rebellion; in short -punk-rock attitudes.

Exploring science fiction at the beginning of the 21st century, John Clute states that researchers might confront themselves with a "classic figure-ground puzzle" and proposes two ways of perceiving it (64). The first one offers us "a vision of the triumph of science fiction as a genre and as a series of outstanding texts which figured to our gaze the significant futures that, during those years, came to pass" while the second describes science fiction as being "fatally indistinguishable from the world it attempted to adumbrate, to signify" (64). Science fiction books and movies flourish and sell better than ever. Yet, we observe that the dominant mood of science fiction is dystopian or critical utopian. *Star Trek*, the movie series created by Gene Roddenberry in the 1960s or *Star Wars*, the epic space opera started by George Lucas a decade later, continue to be developed and brought to the big screen – see *Star Trek Beyond* or *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* simultaneously released in 2016. Intergalactic voyages, conflicts involving aliens and "the final frontier" are, however, overshadowed by the imperative need to explore our own complicated world. Contemporary issues involving: economic disparity, terrorist attacks, totalitarian states, corporate exploitation, unfair policies, religious fanaticism, discrimination, aggressive mass media, pornography as well as environmental degradation, pandemics, scientific experiments and the extreme technologization of daily life are daily headline news but also topics that contemporary SF writers speculate upon. Satires and predictions regarding the near future seem much more captivating than those related to the long distant future. Authors sound a warning signal about what may happen if nowadays problems are left unsolved. For instance, humans may become pieces of technology connected among each other through internetworking brain implants just like in M. T. Anderson's *Feed* (2002), raise clones for organ harvesting, like in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), face a totalitarian America where children are killed for entertainment like in Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010), or witness an apocalypses as it happens in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) or in Margaret Atwood's *Maddaddam* Trilogy (2003-2013).

The evolution of science fiction, its roots and transformations, is extremely important in understanding the complexity and the plasticity of this genre. Numerous voices have juxtaposed science fiction to pulp fiction as both genres deal with lurid or sensational subjects and are often printed on rough, low-quality paper. Moreover, numerous voices stated that the popularity of science fiction does not reflect its quality and that, in fact, such works are crude and immature. The value of any text is, however, interpretable and Theodore Sturgeon's Law

or Revelation of 1958 is concluding in this case. The American writer and critic felt the need to underline that: “The existence of immense quantities of trash in science fiction is admitted and it is regrettable; but it is no more unnatural than the existence of trash anywhere” and therefore “The best science fiction is as good as the best fiction in any field” (qtd in Landon 3).

Science fiction remains a controversial genre, with complex definitions as well as deep roots, twists and ramifications. From the imaginative works dominated by ‘estrangement’ and ‘cognition’, to ‘structural fabulations’ and the development of the ‘mega-text’, science fiction shows that it has much more to offer than simple clichés. Likewise, its evolution from captivating stories about scientific discoveries to realms where various issues regarding society and Self-identity can be criticised and predicted, proves that science fiction is continuously improving and updating according to contemporary needs and expectations. Contradictory discussions concerning this genre will never cease, but this proves that science fiction cannot be ignored and deserves increased attention. On the other hand, controversy may add to its worldwide success. The theoretical exploration of the definition and the evolution of science fiction makes us conclude that perhaps the ‘quest’ is much more important and rewarding than the ‘Grail’ itself.

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