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My Time with Science Fiction

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When I first encountered Doris Lessing's *Canopus in Argos* series, I was blown away by the scope of the vision. What we humans experienced as part of a flurry of froing and toing, was seen in the broadest scope of time and analyzed at leisure. Or rather with its own, different, urgency. Life is not a unified thing, it is always only present 'under a description' (Hacking, 1995) which includes action, but the hardest learning path for the historian (or at least, me) to take is that which involves sensitizing to different temporalities. Sometimes this can be just 'gee whiz' – the enormous timescales of Iain Bank's *Culture*, each its own nested doll of precisely the same dreary story, but each enticing and spangly at the same time. Sometimes it's in the multiplicity of temporality in the present – as in the many, shadowy presents of Philip José Farmer's *World of Tiers* or M. John Harrison's *Things that Never Happened*.

But it's not just that stories go at different paces, it's how they do it. It is hard for me as an historian to grasp this. Life is about temporalities rearing up around us, capturing or rejecting us. Philip K. Dick's characters help: they have a strange relationship with time. As a whole. For example, in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* a precog attempting to understand a possible future he foresees where he is progressively more deeply entwined in a world where the whole idea of a possible future (of change, of his story continuing) is being effaced.

Changing someone's time ecology is changing their ontology. This is the very stuff of history: most commonly expressed as the search for the correct (or most interesting) unit of analysis. Each way we understand past life, we people it with different creatures, collectives and institutions – often in ways of course to tell the same stories, transposed. So I often turn to science fiction (an odd phrase; I inhabit science fiction) to learn about and think living in other ontologies – transforming. *Monkey* by Wu Cheng-En, which may miss some of the formal attributes of science fiction, is amazing on transformation. Monkey is simultaneously the trickster figure, the comic/fool, the Great Monkey King and an already Enlightened Being. (When he is the latter, it is his Enlightened self casting rays back into the past, much as Baudrillard talks of the future atomic war rippling back into the present, but nicer.)

If there's one phrase that gets historians nodding sagely and muttering in low approving tones it's that: "It might have been otherwise". It is easy to think that life is 'mundane' – we have so many routines, prepared meals and narratives that it's easy to wear life like a set of familiar clothes. But what's historically interesting to me is that life is always, ever, beautifully, insanely strange.

No medium other than science fiction explores this particular strain of the natural enchantment of the world.

Works cited

Hacking, Ian. *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*. Princeton University Press, 1995.

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