



Some Notes on the Conceptions of Time and History in Speculative Fiction

Michael Godhe

And I confess unto You, O Lord, that I am as yet ignorant as to what time is, and again I confess unto You, O Lord, that I know that I speak these things in time, and that I have already long spoken of time, and that very long is not long save by the stay of time.

St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XI, chapter 25.

On December 1–3, 2021, the post-apocalyptic rebirth of the first international conference arranged by the *Swedish network for Speculative Fiction* (inaugurated in 2015) took place at Karlstad University.¹ The conference was first planned for November 11–13, 2020, but due to the Covid-19 outbreak, it was postponed. The theme for the conference was *Time and History* – and it was a timely theme. In the gap of time when the conference took place, the pandemic had become ghastly historical past, was still omnipresent in the present, but would also become the not yet undesired future. A few days after the conference, the rapid spread of the Omicron variant prompted further lockdowns. Nevertheless, over 30 papers were presented at the conference, most of them in person.

To give a brief overview of the importance of time in speculative fiction is an almost impossible task within the limited space allotted for this prefatory, but suffice it to say that time has always been an essential feature of speculative fiction. As the CfP for the *Specific 2021* conference stated, “speculative fiction looks into both the past and the future in its attempts to make sense of the bewildering clutter of events, phenomena, and ideas which constitute the present” (Bokne, Ekman and Nyström).

¹ The organising committee consisted of Saga Bokne, Stefan Ekman and Andreas Nyström from Karlstad University, and Michael Godhe from Linköping University.

In the shadow of our contemporary crises prompting dystopian representations of the future, the mixing of temporalities or layers of time has been one of the most essential features of recent speculative fiction narratives. In numerous recent scholarly works on speculative fiction, time has also been an essential analytical tool for analysing temporalities in speculative fiction (see, e.g. Gomel; Chattopadhyay; Polvinen). However, the prevalence of this theme has not been limited only to studies on speculative fiction. In fact, Staffan Bergwik and Anders Ekström argue that in the last two decades there has been a “shift of temporal perspectives ... in an increased scholarly engagement with multiple historical time frames and temporalities” (2). For example, researchers have become more and more interested in

how anthropogenic climate change creates a different understanding of the relation between a variety of time frames, for example by asking to what extent geological and historical timescales merge in the course of the Anthropocene, or how climate change temporalities are different from the time frames of geological epochs. (Bergwik and Ekström 3)

Indeed, speculative fiction often frames its narratives with an overtly dystopian (and maybe covertly utopian) setting, looking backwards or onwards, or mixing timescales when referring to present conditions. As the CfP for *Specific 2021* stated, we have usually regarded SF as the genre that extrapolates into the future and pointed to fantasy as the domain of the past. “However, fantasy can take place in the present, as testified by the increasingly urban fantasy genre” while “subgenres such as alternative history or steampunk may be said to constitute science fictions of the past” (Bokne, Ekman and Nyström). That is to say, traditional conceptions of how time and history work in speculative fiction are being renegotiated among scholars, which is prompting exciting developments in the broad field of speculative fiction studies.

From a historical point of view, time has been an essential element especially to speculative fictions framed with dystopian/utopian settings. Utopian writings before the modern age were often looking backwards, and the present was conceptualised as a degradation from a mythic Golden Age or paradise (Manuel and Manuel 64–92). From the 16th century, Utopia was projected to distant places like the unknown southern island, Terra Incognita Australis (Ambjörnsson), as in such seminal works as Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), which “set the dominant mode of modern utopias” (Forsström 12), and Francis Bacon’s *The New Atlantis* (1627), where science and progress are interlinked. In the context of the 18th century’s emerging evolution theories and the Enlightenment’s flagship idea of progress, Utopia was for the first time projected into the future: *L’An 2440* by Louis-Sébastien Mercier (1770) envisions a progress from the flawed contemporary society to the social and political perfection of the future. Future-oriented, perfect, rational, and sometimes technocratic visions of society dominated 19th century utopian writing, and even prompted a few attempts to create small utopian communities in the US and elsewhere (see e.g. Claves 129–139).

The dystopian turn of the 20th century was a critique directed to these ideas of perfect rational societies as blueprints for utopias. The idea of progress had become questionable against the backdrop of, e.g. the First World War, the Russian Revolution, the Second World War (see e.g. Kumar), and the first

atomic bombings. To simplify matters, these crises marked the end of sketching utopian narratives as societal blueprints (although there were, of course, a few exceptions), but not the end of utopian narratives as a whole (although Utopia would never be the same again).

While some of the 19th century Utopias already featured many generic tendencies of science fiction, it was the Luxembourgish-American inventor, writer, and editor Hugo Gernsback (1884–1967) who finally gave the genre of science fiction its name in the 1920s (after initially talking of “scientification”). For Gernsback, SF was not only an “idea of tremendous import”, as he wrote in an editorial of the June edition of the magazine *Amazing Stories* in 1927. He also believed that SF was important for “making the world a better place to live in, through educating the public to the possibilities of science and the influence of science on life which, even today, are not appreciated by the man on the street” (Gernsback, qtd. in Landon 52). Thus, SF was future-oriented in its initial approach but certainly not always as utopian as Gernsback wished it to be.

Dystopias or anti-utopias, such as Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell’s *1984* (1949), contested the idea of progress and technocracy and pictured totalitarian nightmare societies disguised as utopias (cf. Kumar). However, at the end of the 1960s, the feminist turn of speculative fiction, which was also shaped by ecological concerns, the New Left (Moynan) and social protest movements, further reinvented utopian and dystopian writing as well as science fiction and fantasy (cf. Godhe 2010). With its “postmodern attitude of self-reflexivity” (Baccolini and Moynan 2), the feminist turn transformed speculative fiction in many ways. The concepts of linear development and various socio-technical imaginaries (Jasanoff), such as the idea of progress and unlimited growth, were contested, along with the Eurocentric experience of linear time, which had been dominant in previous Western speculative fiction. Feminist speculative fiction contained generic elements from both science fiction and fantasy as well as other speculative genres. This provided scholars with alternative approaches and new concepts that, rather than differentiating the genres, allowed tying them together. Anne Cranny-Francis coined the concept “literature of estrangement”, which refers to “literature concerned primarily with the alienation experienced by individual subjects, realized textually by a setting displaced in time and/or space” (26). According to Jane Donawerth and Karol A. Kolmerten, this concept “is an especially useful category, because it draws together the several genres that women have used to talk about a better place, and because it exposes the ways in which a text’s working embody its politics” (3). By dropping the word “cognitive” from Darko Suvin’s famous definition of science fiction as the literature of cognitive estrangement, feminist utopias, dystopias, science fiction, and fantasy were brought together by settings displaced in time and/or space, regardless of any other generic tendencies of the narratives. The concept also makes it easier for feminist speculative fiction scholars to create a genealogy of feminist thought in speculative fiction from the 16th century to our times, and by doing so, contest the traditional phallogocentric academic works concerning the history of utopian and dystopian writings (cf. Godhe 2010).

Furthermore, later literature of estrangement – or what I have labelled a feminist turn – became a part of the group of texts that Tom Moynan has called “critical utopias”. These texts display an “awareness of the limitations of the

utopian tradition, so that these texts reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream” (10). These utopias are less perfect and static than such traditional blueprint utopias as *Looking Backwards 2000-1887* by Edward Bellamy (1888) or *News From Nowhere, or, Being an Epoch of Rest* by William Morris (1889: revised 1890) – novels that were seminal and influential in their time. Some of the authors working in the tradition of critical utopias mentioned by Moylan are also staples in the history of the feminist turn (Godhe 2010): Ursula K. Le Guin, Marge Piercy, Joanna Russ, and Samuel Delany, just to name a few.

According to Rafaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, the critical utopias declined in the 1980s, “in the face of economic restructuring, right-wing politics, and a cultural milieu informed by an intensifying fundamentalism and commodification” (2). To cut a long story short, this also revived the dystopian genre. Although some works are gritty and nihilistic (including some of the cyberpunk of the 1980s), Baccolini and Moylan use the concept of critical dystopias to refer to “texts that maintain a utopian impulse”. Critical dystopias, unlike the classic dystopias of *Brave New World, 1984* and the like, “maintain utopian hope *outside* their pages” (7). This encourages the readers to consider the dystopic vision as a warning of a future they can still escape (cf. Chattopadhyay) – a fragile hope that I have discussed in more detail elsewhere (Godhe 2019). Dystopias can thus be conceptualised as anticipatory knowledge, or as Frédéric Claisse and Pierre Delvenne claim,

a successful dystopia aims at making itself obsolete: once the world it depicts is identified as a possible future, it seems to empower its readers again, restoring a ‘sense of possibilities’ that eventually makes alternative pathways thinkable. (156)

According to Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, this applies, for example, to climate change fiction, where the fictionality “does not lend itself by default to apocalypticism, but to the shadow of warning and hope of the otherwise” (7).

There would be much more to say about recent developments in speculative fiction, especially when it comes to conceptions of time and history, and how scholars are addressing these changes. The vivid posthuman turn in the humanities and social sciences has, indeed, been successful in spurring academic interest in speculative fiction that contests human exceptionalism in the face of, e.g., climate degradation. All in all, there are many futurisms in play. This is what Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay has termed “Cofuturism”:

These [futurisms] are stealing the centre of gravity from science fictional imaginaries of the future that are associated with a more singular Anglo-American view of the world and turning towards alternative modes of representation that nonetheless retain science-fictional characteristics. (9)

The developments of speculative fiction in all its representational forms are promising, as are the developments in the academic study of speculative fiction. Previously, together with Luke Goode, I have argued for the need of Critical Future Studies (CFS), a new scholarly approach that

investigates the scope and constraints within public culture for imagining and debating different potential futures. CFS aims to contribute constructively to vigorous and imaginative public debate about the future – a futural public sphere – and to challenge a prevalent contemporary cynicism about our capacity to imagine alternative futures while trapped in a parlous present. (109)

Indeed, the recent developments briefly stated above contribute to a futural public sphere by contesting the cultural, social, and socio-technical imaginaries that have too often been taken for granted. By discussing how conceptions of time and history have been recontextualised and renegotiated in recent speculative fiction as well as by re-reading and reinterpreting older works of SFF, scholarly works can demonstrate how speculative fiction might work as an engaged and open-ended social critique of our current historical juncture (cf. Goode and Godhe).

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Biography: Michael Godhe is Associate Professor and Senior Lecturer at the Department of Culture and Society, Campus Norrköping, Linköping University, Sweden. His research concerns Critical Future Studies with an emphasis on SF: see “Beyond Capitalist Realism – Why We Need Critical Future Studies” (co-written with Luke Goode) in the journal *Culture Unbound*, and the themed issue of *Culture Unbound*, on Critical Future Studies (co-edited with Luke Goode). ORCID ID 0000-0002-3259-9754.

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