



(Largely) Invisible Science Fictions

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In 2023, science fiction seems to be everywhere. Regardless of the estimates – rather optimistic and self-congratulatory – that in the 1960s almost 10 % of all English-language fiction published counted as SF, the borders of the genre have expanded dramatically in the last few decades, even if similar numerical estimates have now become impossible for reasons explained below.

This expansion has happened along two principal axes. The first is geographical and cultural. Afrofuturism (including adjacent terms, such as Africanfuturism) has blazed trails as its artists and commentators have designed the blueprints for how to talk about traditions of speculation that emerged outside the Global North and do not replicate western viewpoints and narrative grooves. Indigenous Futurisms, Sinofuturism, and Gulf Futurism have followed in its wake. The monumental *Routledge Handbook of CoFuturisms* (2023) is an excellent starting point for mapping out these and many more facets of this expansion, but it hardly exhausts the critical mass of articles, books, chapters, and online posts focused on non-western production in the genre. The other vector of expansion has been temporally-oriented and encompasses a gradual recuperation of forgotten names, texts, and phenomena, especially where they have tied to groups deemed minority from the perspective of the original science fiction fandoms and studies: women, artists of color, and creators from outside the Anglo- and Francophone cultural zones.

Privileged in these expansions have been narrative media: literature, film, television, and comics as well as, more recently, video games and a range of analog games, including pen-and-paper RPG, board games, and card games. This is understandable for two distinct, albeit intimately related, reasons. These media readily lend themselves to long-form narratives, a privileged format of cultural entertainment since at least the second half of the 19th century. (Short story tradition may seem an exception here but the detail that science-fictional worldbuilding can conjure makes relatively short texts seem very dense compared to their crime or romance counterparts, SF's fellow travelers during

the heyday of the Culture Previously Known as ‘Popular’.) This long form, in turn, enables not only a solid dose of entertainment, but also allows for the development of multi-layered plotting structures, complex characters, and formal experimentation. Within the Western storytelling traditions, these qualities have long been cherished as markers of mainstream prose, but they also became important following what Mark Bould has called “the Suvin event” (18), a gradual project of science fiction’s cultural and academic legitimization, which is ongoing (and doing great). That, in 2023, science fiction is a discourse best suited to frame the experience of 21st-century techno-modernity is unquestionable, but it is no coincidence that the best examples of that framing are extended narratives: N. K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy, *The Expanse* television series, and franchise storyworlds spanning multiple media channels. This bias is hardly unique to science fiction and parallels the general trend in academic and high-cultural writing, as James Elkins elegantly summarizes:

The majority of essays in the humanities have as their primary methodological orientation an interest in complexity and ambiguity. A plurality of texts describe cultural locations, practices, identities, and objects as hybrid, mixed, impure, marginal, dislocated, disoriented, Creole, Pidgin, transcultural, liminal, meta-, para-, quasi-, or otherwise complex and ambiguous. The pleasure of the text is produced by the very focus on hybridity, mixture, and other kinds of irreducible complexity as much as by whatever other insights are gained into the cultural locations, practices, and so forth, that are the texts’ nominal subjects. (11)

The aforementioned science fiction media are perfectly suited for these kinds of approaches and SF texts have rightfully accrued the cultural capital they deserve, partly due to their capacity to engage planetary structures, networks, and exchanges.

And yet, these media do not represent the majority of science fiction texts that surround us. On a daily basis, we are exposed to many more texts belonging to what I call minor media than to those belonging to one of the major medial forms. These include but are not limited to interactive environments that barely register as games (assuming one uses the latter term to denote texts that set some rudimentary win/lose conditions and/or a system of achievements); short film and its adjacent constellation of music videos, commercials, VFX, and game engine demos; digital graphics and illustrations across a range of techniques, hosted both on larger platforms such as DeviantArt or Behance and individual Instagram accounts; maps linked to franchise worlds across media and platforms; all kinds of cybertexts from Twine to multi-part stories on the platform-formerly-known-as-Twitter and standalone app-like texts; GIFs and nano-films; laser and light installations and performances; architectural designs and visualizations for unbuilt architecture; and software assets, whether visual or audial, including building models, landscape textures, and objects.

The sheer diversity of these forms is stunning. Some, like short film, have been around for a while, but have received a new lease of life in the wake of digital revolution; others, like GIFs, are entirely new. Some of them are visible to relatively narrow demographics, like speculative architectural blueprints, others, like digital graphics, are exposed to broad audiences. Many function as paratexts of larger textual objects, while others are entirely standalone.

Needless to say, it would be a mistake to conflate the complex institutional and technological properties of these different classes of texts, and their sheer diversity in this respect extends beyond the frames of this prefatory. For all their disparate cultural, economic, and functional differences, these science fictions share a number of characteristics.

They usually support at least some narrative structures, but, judged by the standards of long-form storytelling, their stories may seem flimsy, fragmentary, and inconsequential. They are ephemeral and fleeting, partly due to the obsolescence of platforms and systems on which they have been built: this is certainly the case with Twitter bots, which the company blocked a while ago, and complex apps like Steve Tomasula's *TOC* (2009), which now requires an emulator of a pre-2015 Mac system. They often lack centralized sites of audiencing and distribution, which makes their circulations unpredictable. The fact that many are created outside what is known as genre science fiction and do not openly identify as SF only compounds their lack of recognition. This decentralization partly results from their globalization – in fact, one could argue that these new digital science fictions are far more diversely global than any of the genre's older medial forms. This is most readily visible in short film, whose geographical spread is nothing short of stunning. There are shorts made in Costa Rica (*Tierra Ajena* 2018), Egypt (*Ori-Sight* 2013), India (*Everything is Possible* 2022), Kenya (*Pumzi* 2009), the Philippines (*Aliens Ata* 2017), Thailand (*True Skin*, 2013), Taiwan (*The Controller* 2013, which was directed by the Iranian director Saman Keshavarz), and Uruguay (*Ataque de Pánico!* 2009) – and many of these countries are home to more than a few titles. (To be fair, feature productions have also been made outside the Global North. *Nuoc* (2014) from Vietnam, *La Jaula* (2017) from Venezuela, *Serpentário* (2019) from Angola, and *Gundala* (2019) from Indonesia are all cases in point, but these are often difficult to see in western countries due to the lack of distribution, while SF shorts enjoy unfettered global audienceship courtesy of YouTube and similar streaming services.) Last but not least, for scholars and researchers these texts spell a need to look for interpretative frameworks different from the familiar tools of literary or film analysis.

Texts representing these – and more – media forms are as ubiquitous as they are functionally invisible to the audiences attuned to sprawling and aggressively-promoted big-budget productions. By virtue of their brevity and ephemerality, they barely register. Individually, each of them seems almost negligible, but their collective emanation should not be underestimated. Their sheer numbers – practically impossible to gauge – saturate media flows and translate into a collective exposure that can rival box-office hits. These digital texts immerse us in the low-burn, everyday science-fictionality, which can be aesthetically pleasing, but which can also be a delivery vector of powerful ideologies, often embedded in the tools used in their production and distribution. This in itself makes them deserving of our critical attention, but this skepticism should not pre-empt our aesthetic wonder.

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In 2017, he was the first non-Anglophone recipient of the Thomas D. Clareson Award for Distinguished Service presented for outstanding service to the field of science fiction studies and in 2023 he received SFRA's Innovative Research Award. He now serves as President of the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts.

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