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Peeking into the Neighbouring Grove:
Speculative Fiction in the Work of Mainstream Scholars

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The last decade of literary studies has seen new and fruitful debates arise in many fields from cultural theory to poetics. However, among those debates there are a few that seem to be particularly interesting and promising in terms of trying to understand the beast we call prose fiction. These debates also happen to gravitate around issues that many of us would recognise as central to the study of speculative fiction. Admittedly, SF scholarship's relations with the mainstream of literary studies have been difficult in the past (see e.g. Wolfe), and one of the after-effects of that conflict may be a tendency to look for answers to our crucial questions amongst ourselves – within the (young) scholarly tradition formed specifically around speculative writing. In terms of building and strengthening that tradition, it is vital that we recognise its existence and its value as a field of research that carries its own particular brand of expertise. But no genre is an island, and there is much work done elsewhere in literary studies that resonates with some of the most interesting characteristics of speculative fiction.

I would like to pick up three discussions that might be particularly fruitful. The first is postmodernism and its legacy. What really was at stake in postmodern writing, and have those issues been resolved? How much real-world relevance does fiction have? The second debate revolves around the so-called cognitive approaches to literature, and their presentation of the role of fiction in human thought. What is it that we do when we engage with a fiction? Is it a process radically different from our everyday mental processes or from the logical structures of rational thought? And finally, a related question arises from our tendency to overvalue rationality itself. Emotion has been shown to be so essential to our decision-making processes that separating it from rationality is turning out to cause intractable problems to our understanding of the mind. What, then, might be the role of emotion in the history and the present of literary forms? How has the novel, the king of narrative forms today, developed through forms of sentimentalism and social realism to the variety of genres we have, and exactly what role do readerly emotions have in that development?

While similar questions have engaged those of us working on speculative fiction for a long time, SF scholarship has not, as such, taken part in the same conversation as the rest of literary studies. Without going into arguments about why that should be, I thought I would take these questions directly to scholars working in what is seen as the scholarly mainstream, and ask them how they see the role of SF in answering them. I therefore conducted a brief e-mail interview with three researchers representing the sharp end of the debates concerning postmodernism, cognition and emotion: Brian McHale, Jan Alber and Suzanne Keen.

McHale, currently Humanities Distinguished Professor at Ohio State University, is a giant in the field of postmodern literature. His 1987 *Postmodernist Fiction* is still the sharpest analysis of the issues at stake, and one of the most widely used university textbooks on courses focusing on postmodern literature. McHale's central arguments concern the processes of world-building in literature: the various structures of thought that an imagined world can be built on (e.g. his famous distinction between the epistemological dominant of modernism and the ontological dominant of

postmodernism) and the techniques through which a text constructs such a world for readers to imagine and experience (particularly its narrative structures).

“It’s long been my conviction that, of all the genres of popular fiction, SF is the one that sustains the most intimate connections with aesthetically ambitious postmodern writing,” McHale says. “The institutional ecosystems of the two kinds of writing differ, but not necessarily their poetics.” Many of his favourite SF works also bear witness to this close relationship: William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* and *Pattern Recognition*, as well as Colson Whitehead and Haruki Murakami, “novelists poised on the cusp between SF and the mainstream (wherever that might be located nowadays).”

McHale has also taken speculative fiction on board as a central element in understanding the processes of fictional world-building. “I am especially attracted by the proposition, advanced in a relatively restrained form by Carl Freedman, and in a bolder form by Seo-Young Chu, that SF ought to be regarded as the most typical kind of fiction. Fiction stages thought experiments, usually more or less constrained by current reality-models; SF foregrounds the very operations of thought-experiment, and in that sense lays bare the bases of all fictional world-building. Thus, if we want to understand fiction in general, we ought to begin from SF, which exposes for us, as in an x-ray, the deep structure of fiction. I find this idea powerful and exhilarating.” In a recent article (“Science Fiction”) McHale makes this argument with reference to his “once and future favourite” SF novel: Alfred Bester’s *The Stars My Destination* (1956). “My adolescent self loved it, and my aging-professor self sees no reason to disown it.”

An Associate Professor at the Department of English at the University of Freiburg, Jan Alber is one of the younger generation of scholars grappling with postmodernity and its aftermath. Alber has also been one of the foremost proponents of cognitive narratology, i.e. the study of storytelling from an angle formed in cooperation with the cognitive sciences. “I am fascinated by the fact that fictional literature (from the beast fable to the highly anti-illusionist works of postmodernism) consistently moves beyond real-world parameters by representing scenarios and events that would be impossible in the real world,” Alber notes. “I use the term ‘unnatural’ to refer to the physically, logically, or humanly impossible, and I am interested in manifestations of the unnatural as well as the question of what the proliferation of impossibilities throughout literary history tells us about the human mind.” Alber has edited and contributed to a number of collections mapping this new approach, including *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative* from 2013.

Like McHale, Alber sees SF to be a particularly fruitful genre to study in conjunction with postmodernism. “[S]peculative fiction is clearly related to postmodernism, which is a more recent style or type of writing that correlates with a high degree of unnaturalness and, in addition, relates back to already conventionalized impossibilities in established genres (such as speculative fiction).” In his thinking, what is fascinating about SF is the paradox between its impossible content and the ease with which readers accept and are mentally and emotionally engaged by that content. “Speculative fiction is full of impossibilities that have already been conventionalized, i.e., converted into cognitive frames, and no longer strike us as being defamiliarizing. In other words, certain impossibilities have become a crucial aspect of the generic conventions.”

As a narratologist with a view on genre formations and the historical development of forms of storytelling, Alber is most of all interested in how such conventionalizations have happened, and “how the conventionalized impossibilities in well-established genres relate to the not yet conventionalized impossibilities of postmodernism.” Accordingly, his favourite works span the decades and form a continuum from Robert Heinlein’s “All You Zombies” (1959) to Shelley Jackson’s *Half Life* (2006).

My third contact, Suzanne Keen, is Thomas H. Broadus Professor of English and Dean of the College at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. She has long been a scholar of the novel as a historical and constantly developing literary form, and is fascinated with the ways in which narrative fiction navigates social norms. *Victorian Renovations of the Novel* (1998), for example, shows how temporary and often fantastical story spaces function as “narrative annexes” through which

the text can represent things that cannot, as such, be talked about in the fiction of that time. Consequently, her “c19 realism always had a lot of George MacDonald in it.” Keen has also done brilliant work on the emotional relationships between authors, texts and readers in *Empathy and the Novel* (2007), in which she discusses Octavia Butler’s work, among other things.

For Keen, therefore, the segregation of realistic and fantastic genres is inherently problematic. Having absorbed much of the SF megatext through Samuel R. Delany, Ursula LeGuin and J.R.R. Tolkien, she “read Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* when it came out more or less as genre fiction—by then I had read a lot of alternative timeline histories, and I recognized *MC* as a version of that kind of writing. I was primed to love Doris Lessing’s *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, a near future dystopia with a happy escape at the end,” and “was stunned to find that Lessing’s critics really didn’t know what to do with her speculative side.” Such works not only benefit from being read in connection with their speculative ancestry, but that ancestry itself affects how we understand the very form of the novel. “When someone offers a generalization about ‘the novel,’ I test it against my eclectic reading across the sub genres,” Keen notes. “That has been the source of many fruitful arguments.”

Alber, Keen and McHale have all been able to engage with speculative texts in their teaching and research. Of the three, only McHale has had the chance of teaching a specialised speculative fiction course for undergraduates every few years. Mostly they all incorporate individual texts in courses or other forms of teaching that also involve mainstream fiction. “Many of the graduate students on whose committees I serve,” McHale says, “incorporate speculative fictions in their programs of study, which gives me frequent opportunities to discuss SF with them.” “I just wedge them in whenever I feel they might liven up a syllabus,” notes Keen. “A little Neil Gaiman sitting next to the Rushdie.”

It is clear that combining mainstream and speculative fiction in a syllabus will be beneficial to the visibility of SF within literary studies. But the larger question is whether such an approach will be useful for those of us focusing on the unique features of speculative fiction itself. Can such a joint analysis tell us something concrete about SF, more than that its literary value should be acknowledged?

I believe that it can, but I’ll leave that as a cliffhanger for now. Most of all, however, I believe that the answers we seek concerning the specificity of SF can only be found by engaging with the theoretical work being done elsewhere in literary studies – especially when scholars in other fields turn to grapple with issues that clearly relate to speculative genres. Examining postmodernism, cognition and emotion from the perspectives offered to us by scholars such as Alber, Keen and McHale, and examining SF texts in conjunction with other genres may open up a new angle on our familiar debates. If the validity of SF as a genre is more widely recognised in the process, then all the better, and perhaps our expertise in speculative forms of fiction might even push the larger theoretical debates into whole new directions. But none of that can happen, unless the dialogue is as engaged, active and open as possible.

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