



## Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research

journal.finfar.org

### *Lectio praecursoria:*

## The Cowboy Politics of an Enlightened Future: History, Expansionism, and Guardianship in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction

Jari Käkälä

*Jari Käkälä (PhD) defended his dissertation The Cowboy Politics of an Enlightened Future: History, Expansionism, and Guardianship in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction at the University of Helsinki, Finland on the 9<sup>th</sup> of September, 2016. This essay is a slightly edited version of the lectio praecursoria given by Käkälä before the defense. Käkälä's dissertation can be read at the e-thesis service: <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/166004>*

*Keywords: Golden Age science fiction, frontier, guardianship, history, Isaac Asimov, John W. Campbell, Jr.*

*Biography and contact info: Jari Käkälä (PhD in spe, English Philology, Department of Modern Languages) currently works as an hourly paid teacher in the Department of Modern Languages at the University of Helsinki, Finland, and as a freelance translator.*

Isaac Asimov once said in an interview:

Every SF story describes a certain, particular change and decides whether it's for the better or the worse. . . . SF teaches that there are numerous changes and that mankind by its actions can pick and choose among them. We should choose one which is for the better. (Ingersoll 76)

In Asimov's own view, he was trying to not only write engaging fiction with imaginative visions of future but to help the humankind itself toward a better future. This reliance on the power of science fiction, which for Asimov rises from a reliance on science, becomes the key to understanding his work.

Isaac Asimov came to be one of the central writers of the 1940s to 1950s formative period of American science fiction. One of the key characteristics of his work is the emphasis on the genre's societal and political importance. Although his science fiction is nearly always set in the distant future, Asimov imagines the same kind of power games and technocratic approaches to society that both American and global politics saw in the aftermath of the Second World War, and at the beginning of the Cold War. What is more, Asimov's work consistently draws on an understanding of history to explain where these developments emerge from.

In terms of research, Asimov is so much an acknowledged classic of the genre that science fiction scholarship has for long taken his work as something of a self-evident part of the genre's history, something that is always mentioned but rarely discussed. On its own part, my study seeks to bring attention back to Asimov's work by examining the themes of history, frontier expansionism, and guardianship in his key works, the *Robot* and the *Foundation* series. By doing this, I also analyze Asimov's influence on the genre of science fiction at a time when it began to distance itself from the poor reputation of pulp fiction and refine its key tropes and themes. So while my study is about the development of Isaac Asimov's science fiction, it is also about the development of the genre itself – and the political climate of United States before and during the Cold War.

When Asimov started writing in the 1940s, pulp magazines were the main American medium of the genre, publishing fiction where science rarely provided more than a topical backdrop for the rather formulaic action-adventure plots. The so-called Golden Age of American science fiction (commonly thought to extend from 1938 to the 1950s) came to refine this, developing into an era of great activity where the motifs of science fiction began taking their modern shape. A key figure in this development, and a crucial influence for Asimov, was the editor of *Astounding Science-Fiction* magazine, John W. Campbell, Jr. Publishing also most of Asimov's central works, under Campbell's editorship *Astounding* became the most prestigious outlet of the genre and sought to publish stories that were more firmly based on actual science and considerations of how scientific advance might affect the society.

While also the literary quality of magazine science fiction improved under Campbell's reign, it is important to note that the respectability of science fiction that Asimov and Campbell were striving for was not about artistic merit, but about the scientific relevance, the content, of their speculations. Campbell emphasized the thought-experiment nature of science fiction and saw it as the literature for the "Technological Era" which understands that

change is the natural order of things, that there are goals ahead larger than those we know.  
That the motto of the technical civilization is true: There must be a better way of doing this.  
(Campbell xiii)

Together with a strong sense of science fiction as literature of ideas, this desire to find a better way becomes a key point in Asimov's work. Following these notions, I examine the view of the world that they promote.

My research began with Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy, nowadays considered a canonic work of science fiction. Set some 20,000 years in the future, Asimov's series narrates the fall of an Old Galactic Empire and the establishment of another empire in its place. This movement of rebuilding and cultural revival takes place through the Foundation, a scientific community which is exiled to the outskirts of the Empire at the beginning of the story. It is an episodic story, originally published as a serial in eleven issues of *Astounding* over the time of nine years, from 1942 to 1950. Almost every story employs different characters and takes place at a different time period of Asimov's fictional galaxy, creating a sense observing the large movements of the flow of history, but also turning the stories into dramatized thought-experiments, each building on or challenging the previous one (see also Delany 223–227).

Also Asimov's *Robot* series, the other major part of my material in this study, is episodic by its nature. The robot stories begin as problem-solving where engineers have to disentangle practical issues with the robots while using them as tools for space exploration. By this narrative formula, also these stories become repeated thought-experiments, examining the logic consequences of the programming and safeguards built into the robots. Gradually, however, also the robot stories and novels develop into a narrative of social engineering and human expansion into space. Asimov's 1980s novels, then, combine the *Robot* and *Foundation* series into one fictional world, seeking to create a unified narrative of the future history of humanity.

Thus, the fact that Asimov's series seemed to be pervaded by a sense of history provided the first major theme for my examination. To address this question, I studied how Asimov roots his series in history by deliberately giving it the appearance of historical fiction, but more importantly also by its content which transmits an urgent need to understand history in order to construct a future. I found this to be visible even on the level of his characters who are often acutely aware of their historical moment and able to use this awareness to assume control of society and steer it in the desired direction. Although Asimov (1920–1992) saw himself as writing “social science fiction,” which portrays the effects of changes on the level of entire societies, his stories frequently depict powerful individuals engaged in constant battles of intellect and problem-solving, progressing from one crisis to another. This leads to stories ruled by meritocracy and social Darwinism, reinforcing the view that history is made by back-room deals and manipulations that bypass democratic processes at moments of crisis.

A key societal crisis in Asimov's series is the stagnation of humankind, and his characters' understanding of history also presents them with a very American method of frontier expansion to solve this crisis. Indeed, my second finding in this study was that much of Asimov's work seems to draw on the history of American expansionism and the ideology of Manifest Destiny – and that the frontier notion is present also on the level of Asimov's characters who are often fusions of historically aware leaders and cowboy heroes of popular westerns. To be sure, transferring the imagery of American frontier expansion to space adventures was an established convention already by the 1940s when Asimov began his series. Even as Golden Age science fiction entailed a better understanding of the metaphorical potential of the frontier, it was still rooted in the popular conception of the frontier – which is evident in Asimov's work. Despite his Enlightenment ideals and explicit use of historical models, Asimov's works exhibit the popular glorification of frontier character types – alongside with power politics of the 1940s and 1950s. This is also where my study gets the cowboy politics of enlightenment in its title. However, what Asimov and other Golden Age science fiction authors did with these frontier notions was more than a mere transposition from the Arizona desert to imaginary Mars colonies. As I argue, these authors developed the common frontier action-adventure story tropes by shifting the focus from physical to intellectual action, and as a result the hero of Golden Age science fiction became a metaphorical version of the lone gunman: a scientist, or a politician, a problem-solving engineer who takes justice into his own hands. As a hero of intellectual action, he uses words, knowledge, and his quick mind instead of fast guns, and bypasses conventional democratic procedure in order to defend the crowd.

However, such heroics also bring up concerns of authoritarianism. On their part, Asimov's metaphorical cowboy heroes prove how uncomfortably similar the archetypal American hero may be to a tyrant when he becomes an administrator instead of just saving the villagers and riding off into the sunset.

The paternalist tones, and the way Asimov's characters use their knowledge of history to steer humankind into new frontier expansion, lead also to guardianship, the third and final theme of my study. In this context, I take *guardianship* to mean the constant management of the course of humankind by enlightened heroes or other entities in society as they take power over masses, and I find it to form a bridge from Asimov's 1940s and 1950s works to his 1980s work. Indeed, as most of Asimov's science fiction searches for the “better way of doing this,” in the course of his series he tries out numerous ways of ensuring the survival of humankind – and relies on the power of science, and Enlightenment-inspired ideals of applying new knowledge to better steer the world. At the same time, the vision of an enlightened guardianship becomes intertwined with paternalist views, and the solutions tested by Asimov's series reflect the pragmatic ethos of Campbell's Golden Age science fiction. Recurrently, the attempts to achieve the greatest good for all humanity in Asimov's series result in utilitarian management of humankind and an approach where a good end result justifies even rather questionable means. Asimov's stories frequently find that managing the society causes

constant tension and resentment because of limiting individual freedom, but instead of calls for democracy they frequently end at the notion that the guardianship must remain secret and outside the society itself. What is more, the power elites that Asimov depicts are often revealed to be controlled by even more concealed power elites, creating worlds that consist of layers of hidden control, elitism, and meritocracy.

Still, even as Asimov's work exhibits cynicism about human societies and their dynamics – it seems to be cynicism only about the existing world, not what it could be. In the end, in all its optimistic reliance on science and a very American sense of pragmatic problem-solving, Asimov's work hangs on the ultimately idealistic hope that someday humankind might possess enough knowledge and understanding – some of it perhaps gathered also through science fiction – to be able to avoid old mistakes and choose a future “which is for the better.” Thus, the goal in much of Asimov's fiction seems to be the utopia of a stable but self-rejuvenating society, a move from a history of conflict towards a sustainable peace. And it is this belief in constant progress, together with the fundamental optimism about the ability of science to engineer a better future that is present in much of Golden Age science fiction. As also my study demonstrates, this is not always unproblematic and sometimes the Golden Age engineer's intellectual enjoyment at finding a solution to the task at hand seems to overshadow all ethical considerations. This can be seen also in Asimov's work. While the enormous scale of Asimov's fictional galaxy full of people makes it a good abstract thought-experiment, that experiment is in danger of losing sight of its most important component: the humans that are being steered. As a result, the drive to build the best possible society that provides greatest good for as many as possible frequently clashes in Asimov's fiction with the notion of individualism, thus also highlighting the tensions in the American technocratic and authoritarian impulses.

In terms of the development of the genre, Golden Age science fiction became a proponent of a science-based worldview and began to consider the genre as a way to participate in societal discussion. At the same time, its response to the Second World War and Cold War situations was also part of an era of narratives that favored meritocratic elitism and technocratic rationalism. In this context, Asimov created a fictional world where, one crisis and one partial solution at a time, various agents take control of society to gradually steer it toward a utopia they know they will never reach, but must constantly strive towards.

## Works cited

Asimov, Isaac. “Social Science Fiction.” *Modern Science Fiction*, edited by Reginald Bretnor. Coward-McCann, 1953, pp. 157–196.

Campbell, John W. Jr. Introduction. *The Astounding Science Fiction Anthology*. Simon and Schuster, 1952, pp. ix–xv.

Delany, Samuel R. *Starboard Wine: More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan, 2012.

Ingersoll, Earl, G., editor. “A Conversation with Isaac Asimov.” *Science-Fiction Studies* vol. 14, no.1, 1987, pp.68–77.