SCIENCE FICTIONALITY

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LET'S FACE IT

DYSTOPIAS ARE EASIER

TO CREATE

TO PREDICT

TO PRESENT

THAN UTOPIAS (APOCALYPSES ARE EVEN EASIER)

THAN UTOPIAS (A PLACE TO BUILD OUR DREAMS)

UTOPIAS (OUR DREAMS)

What is science fictionality? It is not science fiction, not an envelope for literary or aesthetic artefact, however economical or extravagant. Science fictionality is the way in which we narrativise possibilities, whereby the experienced reality of our lives as individual and as species is temporally directed towards the future and conditionally bound to technoscientific change. Take for example the narrative of 'planetary boundaries', perhaps the quintessential science fictional narrative of our times in the dystopian vein. In 2009, Johan Rockström from Stockholm University and colleagues in a small article in Nature wrote about these 'nine boundaries that define the safe operating space for humanity with respect to the Earth system and are associated with the planet's biophysical subsystems or processes'. This was followed by the usual apocalyptic rhetoric: 'If these thresholds are crossed, then important subsystems, such as the monsoon system, could shift into a new state, often with deleterious or potentially even disastrous consequences for humans.' (Rockström et al., 2009) There were the terms that have in contemporary time become media watchwords: phosphorus, ozone depletion, climate change. There was also the usual cluster of allied associations: sustainability, conservation. Et cetera. In the humanities, GayatriSpivak, half a decade before, with her usual boldness, had proposed the acceptance of a new concept: 'planetarity': the recognition that we existed as a species, on a planet loaned to us. (Spivak 2003)

The same vocabulary, with the humanities inflection, watered the plant of her interdisciplinarity. We are running short of essentials, and time is running out. This narrative of planetary boundaries, itself an amalgam of ideas that have their origins in the industrial revolution, and even in their present sense since at least the first atomic weapon, transforms the future from an infinite field of mysteries to a dimly lit blind alley. A general alarmism maintains the industries of despair, and rightly so, and ensures continued funding for concerned activity: some of us need to fix the lamps on that blind alley.

Like all narratives, there is a villain in this story: the city. The city, with its vastness, networked impersonality, randomness, sewers and waste, represents at once the pinnacle of human industry and the cornerstone of its modernity, and its exact opposite, a wasteland symptomatic of human wastefulness and degeneracy. If artists are to be believed, we are heading straight towards the anarchy of McCool and Templesmith's 'Shotgun City':

> 'devo-fucking-lution: how we have embraced you. We're living in one big melting pot of futility and folly, and somehow it continues to flourish. There's not a thing I can do about it. Not anymore. Mutiny has ravaged the ship and we are slowly sinking. Note even the sharks will want to eat us.' (McCool and Templesmith, 2010)

I wanted to explore here the relation of the city of London to science fictionality, to see in particular the ways in which the narrative of degeneration and decay pervades a representation of the city in science fiction literature. This is because science fictionality, although more than the genre of science fiction, is certainly allied to it. It is in fact it is the defining characteristic of the latter, for we cannot have something called science fiction that is not science fictional. For IstvanCsicsery-Ronay, Jr. Science fictionality is characteristic of all of what he calls technologiade, 'the epic of the struggle surrounding the transformation of the cosmos into a technological regime' (Csicsery-Ronay 2008). Science fictionality is what allows us to understand the mechanisms by which the science fiction text engages in world-building and constructs the relations internal to that world.

London, as a megalopolis, has all the attributes of a city one can imagine. Or maybe one can say, like Disraeli in Lothair, that London is a nation, not a city (Moorcock 2012: 33). It had those attributes in the time of William Blake when he wrote about chartered streets and mind forged manacles, and things just kept getting more city-like. Fin-de-siècle alarmists spoke of outcast London, a theme that has recurred at various points since then, including, recently, China Mieville's 2009 novel The City and the City. Herbert Spencer and Francis Galton weighed in with their science fictional opinions on eugenic manipulation of the race in order to nip the degeneracy and decadence in the bud. Stoker came up with Dracula, a Romanian undead feudal lord let loose in London to terrify its wealthy bourgeoisie that had grown with colonial trade. The novel bloomed in Victorian England.

And then a certain kind of literature began to be written, which introduced a speculative element into the mix. This speculative element was of at least two different kinds. One was analogical, in which the speculative was an extension of the present, and the other metaphorical, in which the speculative mirrored the present. H. G. Wells, the father of the British tradition of this literature, wrote examples of both, and stretched the limits of the future state of London. The War of the Worlds recreated British colonialism in Tasmania and placed it in London where the Martians became the colonisers ruthlessly eradicating the 'natives':

> ‘And before we judge of them too harshly we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but upon its inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit?’ (Wells 1898: 4-5)

The Time Machine (1895) stretched class divisions to a point where humanity evolved into two distinct species. The workers became the industrious yet cannibalistic Morlocks, while the bourgeoise became the beautiful, ‘consumptive’, infantile Eloi. The Time Machine story was set in Surrey, not London, although a number of sequels have been set in London.

‘But at first, starting from the problems of our own age, it seemed as clear as daylight to me that the gradual widening of the present merely temporary and social difference of the capitalist from the labourer was the key to the explanation. No doubt it will seem grotesque enough to you and wildly incredible, and yet even now there are circumstances that point in the way things have gone. There is a tendency plainly enough to utilize underground space for the less ornamental purposes of civilization; there is the Metropolitan Railway in London, for instance, and all these new electric railways ; there are subways, and underground workrooms, restaurants, and so forth. Evidently, I thought, this tendency had increased until industry had gradually lost sight of the day, going into larger and larger underground factories, in which the workers would spend an increasing amount of their time. Even now, an East End worker lives in such artificial conditions as practically to be cut off from the natural surface of the earth and the clear sky altogether... So, in the end, you would have above ground the Haves, pursuing health, comfort, and beauty, and below ground the Have-nots; the workers, getting continually adapted to their labour.’ (Wells 1922: 114-117)

Richard Jefferies wrote After London in 1885, and it is one of the first examples of postapocalyptic fiction in Britain. A catastrophe decimates the population, and the few survivors try to adapt to the new surroundings. The novel is in two parts; in the first we are given a description of the new London, which is a swampland and the second is the adventure that makes it science fiction instead of a future history. There is a subtle distinction between future history and the science fiction. The future history plays with the notion of truth; that incidents recorded in such a history will be realised in the future, like prognostics or what is now called foresight studies. Wells had a good phrase for it in his own future history: ‘the shape of things to come.’ Science fiction does not claim historicity as a vector; it claims its truth from science. Although a few utopias did come up, particularly socialist utopias like William Morris’ News from Nowhere (1890), a majority of the works dealt with chaos. And after the chaos, the dissatisfaction of a society and civilization that has crumbled. Lord Dunsany’s Joseph Jorkens, world explorer, in the nineteen thirties and forties, tells fantastic stories in a London club about the Empire in an Empire coming to an end, trying to restore magic to a world with no more dark places. By mid-twentieth century, it all became part of one big story, the story of what we call science fiction. And when the 60s new wave with writers like J. G. Ballard and Michael Moorcock came on the scene, post world war trauma, cold war threat, and psychedelic drugs mingled in the surreality of their vertical cities and flying cars. Moorcock described his fantasy landscapes as the product of war-time experiences, specifically, wartime London.

> 'The metamorphosis of Blitzed London became the chaotic landscape of Elric the Albino. As in need of his soul-drinking sword as Chet Baker was in need of his junk, he witnessed the death of his Empire, even conspired in it. The adrenaline rushes of aerial bombardment and imminent death informed the Jerry Cornelius stories where London's ruins were recreated and disaster had a celebratory face.' (Moorcock 2012: 21)

His New Worlds colleague, J. G. Ballard, probably the most important science fiction writer of the last half of the twentieth century, whose ideas on science fiction also gave rise to the term 'architecture fiction' as an equivalent of science fiction, wrote:

> 'The world is continuing to grow more surreal. The external world is now a kind of huge surrealist novel that we all inhabit, and we look more and more to our own imaginations to find reality. That's a complete reversal, of course, since the heyday of surrealists in the 1930's. The surrealists set out to remake the external world using the interior world of fantasy, and that's been reversed. You treat reality now as if it's a huge dream. That's the way you can make sense of, let's say, somebody like Ronald Reagan. You've got to treat the landscape of television, of advertising, of politics conducted as a branch of advertising, of your friends and the way they furnish their homes, and yourself, as if you're a figment in a dream. That's the classic surrealist approach.
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> I can't see this trend reversing itself, simply because as the prosperity of the world increases people have more leisure time, so we're moving into what will be a wholly entertainment culture. And the world of work, in the traditional sense, will have passed into oblivion. People will live for the hours of recreation and entertainment. Increasingly, everything in life begins to mimic the entertainment industries. We see the traditionally serious professions such as medicine and architecture moving into the realms of show business, with show business lawyers who behave like film stars. The whole of postmodernist architecture is an off-shoot of surrealism: the use of architectural forms to express fantasy. .. But now these surrealist jokes are now in the form of hundred-million dollar office blocks.' (Ballard 1988)

From technofutures they retreated to the 'inner space' of the Ballardian world, trying to define a new aesthetic for a new generation where hope was a luxury, and ultimate redemption, impossible. From there to a nostalgic return that we find in British steampunk, usually based in London, is but a small step, even when the works are deliberately subversive, like the Luther Arkwright graphic novels by Bryan Talbot. They imbue the far future with Victorian sentimentality.

This is, in most ways, the state of contemporary British science fiction. Or what is British in it anyway. Some authors have all but abandoned Britain for stories of the far future, for example, Ian M Banks sets his novels in 'Culture', similar to Star Trek in that it is set in a post-scarcity (and in some ways post-national) galaxy, but different in its technological framing, and different in that Culture is about colonialism at a galactic and universal scale whereas Star Trek is not. In some ways both universes are conservative: both revisit the old idea of the expanding frontier in the Western but for a completely different purpose. In the western the characters need to expand in order to find and create better places for themselves, in a post-scarcity world characters need to expand because they are bored with having everything, and must therefore seek adventure 'boldly' out there. There is nothing recognizably British in Banks. An occasional exception to the rule are

episodes of the British television series Dr Who. But the most exciting exception to this is the work of China Mieville. Although most of his work is set in the alternate universe of Bas Lag, Mieville has consistently focused on the city of London (in books such as King Rat and UnLondon) in his work, although the London he describes is very much in the same tradition.

Yes, that is what I wanted to explore. But then I realised I would not. Not because of shortage of material, for London has been the focal point of much science fiction (and also, of fantasy) since its inception, and the history of London in science fiction is yet to be written. But I wouldn't for two reasons.

One, dystopias are easy. And British science fiction, or, if I were to follow the author and critic Brian Stableford, British scientific romance, has always loved dystopias. In fact, Nicholas Ruddick, trying to identify the existence of such a thing as British science fiction in order to distinguish it from its American counterpart, identifies pessimism as one of the chief characteristics of the British tradition. Everywhere in British science fiction, we find things coming to an end. To a certain extent this is due to an obsession with the twin tropes of Empire and biological determinism, and since the nineteenth century, the laws of thermodynamics, which Barri J. Gold calls 'thermopoetics' (consider for instance a play as recent as Tom Stoppard's Arcadia.)

Two, depending on your scale, uniqueness of a city is an artefact of its past and present, and a footnote of its future. The future city, for anyone willing to look past the geographical tyranny of the present, is not a unique location. The future city is a space altered by globalitarian forces into a dispersed homogeneity; every city in that future is 'The City', and all that existed before it will have uniqueness catalogued and displayed as in a cabinet of curiosities or an exotic zoo, peddled for tourist smiles and the picture postcard.

The reason then that I chose to alter the focus of my talk slightly is that we can take any city and sample its uniqueness alongside its familiarity. We can do so even now. The speculative tendencies of a futurist run along the lines of familiarity rather than uniqueness. And because I did not want to speak of dystopias. It is science fictionality; but what I refer to specifically is an unvarnished belief in the magic of the future, and our capacity to not merely survive it, but find our way to the stars. Space cities if you like. That would be a good beginning.

Warren Ellis, the prominent English transhumanist and graphic novelist, in his keynote speech at the 2012 Improving Reality Conference, 'How To See The Future' engages in a similar thought process. Ellis's point is simple. He takes issue with VentakeshRao's term 'manufactured normalcy': 'the idea is that things are designed to activate a psychological predisposition to believe that we're in a static and dull continuous present.' This is because, Ellis explains, a loss of wonder.

Science fiction ideas of the future seem to have either been realised in tiny gadgets (the table and the Star Trek TNG PADD – personal access display device for example), and a sense of living in the science fiction condition itself has become a symptom of banality, so much so that people explore everything through a 'rear-view mirror'. Where are those magical inventions that were promised to us in the 1920s? And when something is invented, we try to discover its origins. We have our face turned either backwards or upstream, and we have stopped perceiving the present as magical, where every moment new ideas, concepts and technologies are coming to life. Ellis asks us to restore our faith in the science fiction condition, and the magic of the present.

> 'Reality as we know it is exploding with novelty every day. Not all of it's good. It's a strange and not entirely comfortable time to be alive. But I want you to feel the future as present in the room. I want you to understand, before you start the day here, that the invisible thing in

the room is the felt presence of living in future time, not in the years behind us.

To be a futurist, in pursuit of improving reality, is not to have your face continually turned upstream, waiting for the future to come. To improve reality is to clearly see where you are, and then wonder how to make that better.

Act like you live in the Science Fiction Condition. Act like you can do magic and hold séances for the future and build a brightness control for the sky.

Act like you live in a place where you could walk into space if you wanted. Think big. And then make it better' (Ellis 2012)

Science Fiction condition.Science Fiction.Science Fictionality. Ellis' point is a valid and a subtle one, but there are more problems in the Science Fiction condition than Ellis has space for in his very short keynote. This is not because humanity always looks at things through a rear-view mirror, or is not caught in the charm of novelty; it is because novelty itself is considered an inevitable product of living in the science fiction condition. Science is the eugenics of ideas. As 'science,' however defined, comes to refine our ideas and our picture of the universe, what is novel therefore, and how society develops, is considered bound to linearity, the linearity, that is, of technoscientific development. The idea of innovation, a product of the marketability of ideas, defines our movement across this linearity, and what we perceive is a constant connection between the future to come and the present, even as we give it shape. It is not the rear view mirror, nor is that face turned upstream 'waiting for a future to come'; we act as if we live in a future, but what that future is like, has already been defined. Like Isaac Asimov's psychohistory in the Foundation universe, where thousands of years into the future have been mapped out by telepathic sages, the future is a knowable quantity. If the future is the absolute unknown, then we have a right to know about it. Science fictionality is our heuristic playpen, our way of inscribing possibility on the palimpsest of perception. What I have tried to demonstrate, is that from authors Jefferies, Wells and Wyndham to Banks, Ellis and Mieville, there is a certain way of extrapolating that works with either analogy or metaphor. These two in turn are premised on two methodological assumptions about the future, epistemological, by which one means that the present state of knowledge and the future state of knowledge are connected, and therefore the future to be designed requires a better modelling of the ways in which we know and can know, and technological futurism, by which one means that one can extrapolate future technologies from current one. But we need to look beyond a dystopia that we have come to accept. Even cosy dystopias. The ultimate unpredictability of the future is a precondition for restoring the magic that Ellis speaks of.

Predictables are too easy; how we deal with unpredictability is the true test of our foresight - and that is not a tautology. Can we be ready for eutopia?

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