

Generic Considerations

The Urth list — 40 messages, 14 voices, 22 Apr 2003

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3967>

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 22 Apr 2003, 19:26

Fair warning: This is going to be boring to about 50% of listmembers; contains a lot of stuff that some of you have seen before, either from me or from outside reading; and I don't guarantee any explicitly Lupine content at all.

I find this thread to be of particular interest. I cannot and will not purport to be an expert in 'SF', but the above comments from you both have given me pause for thought last coupla days, roughly to the effect of what _is_ science fiction, anyway?

and also:

I would tentatively suggest that much of Mr. Burroughs's (William Seward henceforth unless stipulated otherwise) work could be called SF

I reply:

There are a lot of definitions of SF which depend on content, such as those you mention; all of these seem flawed. Often I use Damon Knight's ostensive definition ("Science fiction is what I'm pointing at when I say 'science fiction'"), but that's ... well, not a joke, certainly, but not actually very useful.

I regard "SF" as a multivalent and multiordinal term, depending on whether one uses it in the context of reading, writing, publishing, marketing, sales, etc., but for critical purposes, I find the following useful, if a tad verbose:

SF is a fuzzily-bounded collection of texts generated by an equally fuzzily-bounded collection of writers, operating in an ongoing dialogue and a developoing tradition, and using a common set of "thematic" and rhetorical tropes.

[For the purpose of this discussion I'm using the word "thematic" rather more broadly than is normally its proper range, mostly because I can't recall offhand the correct term for what I want -- the set of codes and devices which deal with the literal "content" (plot, landscape, etc.) of a story. "Hermeneutic" seems wrong here.]

As such, SF neither existed before Hugo Gernsback gave it a name (originally "scientifiction," or STF) and a home (THE ELECTRIC EXPERIMENTER, then AMAZING STORIES and apres ca, la deluge), nor did it spring suddenly to existence from the brain of Gernsback; what he named and located was a tradition and dialog that had already begun to develop in a number of writers. By thus naming and locating it, he partially-separated it from the larger tradition and dialogue of mainstream/mimetic/mundane fiction, which I will refer to as MF; this separation however occurred as part of a larger commercial/artistic movement in which quite a few such

namings-and- locatings similarly took place, caused by/causing the explosion of the generic pulp fiction marketplace. (SF may not be, as some critics have suggested, the "last" of the pulp-derived genres to gain a name and a home, but it was certainly quite late in the game.)

SF, a knowably-small "pool" of writers and texts, was thus enabled to develop its own concerns and its own ways of addressing those concerns. SF _apparently_ begins as simple adventure fiction with exotic locales; however, it also begins with an editorial mandate to educate. While it never did really fulfill (and rarely tried to) Gernsback's prescription for educating its readers about science, the presence of that prescription exerted from the first a kind of pressure on its writers to address something more than, as the classic anthology title puts it, adventures in space and time.

None of which is to claim that all, or even much, early generic SF was ambitious or even interesting. Much of it was written by career pulp writers who were interested in it only as another market for penny-a-word adventure dreck.

However, even "before the Golden Age," SF also attracted writers who perceived it as possessing possibilities beyond exotic adventure, and who saw in it the chance to write something impossible in MF or the other pulp genres. Crude as their early productions were, writers like Leinster, Williamson, and most especially Stanley G. Weinbaum actively sought to _do something_ with SF.

Delany has written extensively on the linguistic possibilities of SF -- how SF writers write sentences that have meanings utterly different from what they might have in an MF text ("He turned on his left side"; "Her world exploded") as well as sentences which simply make no sense in an MF text ("The door deliquesced"; "I spent a year working the monopole magnet mines in the second asteroid belt of 61 Cygni"). This is also (of course) true at the level of scenes and stories - indeed, SF began with these larger blocks of the unique and worked only gradually toward the rhetoric of style, the ability to pack a sentence.

Consider again "The door deliquesced."

This sentence, from Delany's novel STARS IN MY POCKET LIKE GRAINS OF SAND sets itself explicitly in dialogue with the famous (at least, in-genre) sentence, "The door dilated," from Heinlein's novel BEYOND THIS HORIZON.

Heinlein's sentence has been analyzed at length by a number of critics as a remarkable example of STFnal rhetoric: in three words, for the reader willing and able to do the work to decode it, it implies not only the visual image of a door constructed as an iris, but a discourse on the engineering and construction solutions necessary to make such doors part of an ordinary home. Somewhat less clear is a discourse on the kind of society that finds dilating doors more desirable than hinged: are they more secure? do they keep out pollution better? what are the economic implications? etc.

The point of all of which, of course, is that _none_ of these discourses are explicit in the text. They exfoliate as the reader considers the implication of the sentence, which is casually placed in the middle of a longer scene.

Harlan Ellison, commenting on this sentence, summed it up simply: "By God, now I _knew_ I was in the future."

Now, Delany's sentence, which also implies a similar set of visual imagery and technological and socioeconomic discourses, also operates at the metatextual level to place both his door and

the society in which it operates into contrast with Heinlein's. It isn't necessary to know that, or to have read Heinlein, to enjoy STARS IN MY POCKETS...; it is, however, necessary to know how to decode a sentence like "The door deliquesced" -- a skill which not all readers possess; it must be learned, in much the same way one must learn the skills involved in reading poetry or any other genre with its own special tropes.

Heinlein is neither the originary point (obviously) nor the terminal point (thank God) of STFnal rhetoric. He is, however, its first master; he invented or developed most of the tropes by which modern SF signifies its fictive landscapes. John Campbell encouraged this and encouraged other writers to learn from Heinlein's writing. Prior to the advent of Heinlein in Campbell's ASTOUNDING, the tropes of SF were crude beyond belief -- to accomplish what "The door dilated" accomplishes, a typical SF writer would bring the story to a screeching halt while he described the functioning in excruciating detail, following which either the author or a scientist "character" might discourse at length on the engineering and socioeconomic background of the dilating door: the dreaded Expository Lump, also known as the "As you doubtless know, Smithers" speech.

One aspect of STFnal rhetoric is a kind of literalness not available in MF -- the sentences cited above provide excellent examples; the person who "turned on his left side" is transformed, by being in an SF text, from a guy rolling over in bed to a cyborg, robot, or android activating some of his body's circuitry. The woman whose world "exploded" is turned from a romance heroine who's just got some bad news to, well, Princess Leia: someone who owns a world and watches it destroyed. ("No! Basketball is a peaceful planet!") Admittedly, this is still probably bad news...

Which brings us back, at long last, to William S. Burroughs. Are books like NOVA EXPRESS "SF?"

This is where I value the fuzziness I insisted on in my "definition." Burroughs clearly does not operate in the generic dialogue and tradition of SF. Nonetheless, he clearly does use some of the "thematic" and rhetorical tropes of SF to address his own concerns, which are not typically those of SF. The tropes he borrows tend to be pre-Heinlein: in fact, he seems to write a more sophisticated prose using the primitive tropes of an Edgar Rice Burroughs.

There are several implications here, but perhaps the most important is that Wm. Burroughs does not use the literalized rhetoric of modern SF. Nor, I hasten to point out, does he fall back into the realm of hazy metaphor.

The rhetoric of MF uses a lot of discursive energy describing subjectivity: emotions, mental states, etc., all of which propels and enables the use of the "her world exploded"-type metaphor. My point here is not pejorative; a good MF writer would use a fresh metaphor, but it would still be a metaphor and would still express subjective states.

SF by contrast stresses objectivity, thus the "literalness" of much SF rhetoric. Again, this is not pejorative; the objectivity drives the possibility of a vast (possibly metaphoric) dialogue between an imagined world and the "real" world, in which the difference of the two drives an interrogation of the latter -- why are things the way they are? What are the implications?

The non-STFnal SF of Burroughs simply does not take advantage of that possibility. The subject is still primary, but it is externalized and literalized in the horrific worlds he describes.

Somewhere in there I hope I've answered the questions and comments I'm nominally replying to!

A few other of your comments and questions, answered in far less agonizing detail:

(In fact, it just occurred to me, by the above definition Ambrose Bierce's 'The Damned Thing' could also be defined as an SF story, as could many others not normally included in this canon.)

Bierce is often cited as a generic ancestor of SF, though on a very different trajectory from, say, Verne, Wells, or (ER)Burroughs -- rather, along a trajectory paralleling that of H.P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe.

And, if Burroughs is not a SF writer in these terms, is this being said because his work also attempts to meet other objectives? And, if so, it is possible for a work to be SF but also more than SF?

This implies a limitation to the possible/potential value of SF per se which I categorically reject.

However, I certainly agree that a work can be both SF and something other than SF.

In fact, (WSB)'s SF owes more to Edgar Rice Burroughs than to >modern SF,

Oh, to be sure! But if the images are employed by a 'modern' writer such as WSB in a different context, might they not take on a contemporary value of their own?

Clearly they do. The point, however, was that ERB -- though some of his works had content of a sort which would come to be part of SF -- was not an SF writer as such. His early work is closely ancestral to SF, but after SF-as-such appeared in the world, he continued on his own way and pretty much ignored the developing dialog and tradition that defines the genre as a (critical or writerly) genre. To be influenced by ERB, then, is not to be influenced by SF at all.

but even he uses the strategic-deployment-of-details riffs Heinlein pioneered (especially, but not solely, in NOVA EXPRESS).

I'm afraid I haven't read enough Heinlein to really understand what you mean by this pioneering.

The sentence discussed in detail above is one example. Another much-discussed example is a trick Heinlein pulled several times, but most notably in STARSHIP TROOPERS: his first-person narrator does not mention his own racial/ethnic history for a long time; the reader is, therefore, likely to assume that Johnny is the typical white hero of an SF adventure novel. Something like 3/4 of the way through the book, he briefly mentions, in passing, the dark color of his skin. Delany (himself black) describes in several places the shock he felt as a young man, realizing that, for several hundred pages, he's been mentally living in a society where the color of one's skin is so socially unimportant that it needn't be mentioned.

(A decade later, Delany was told by an editor at Bantam that he couldn't possibly get away with not mentioning in the first few pages of his novel DHALGREN that the protagonist was not white... some things just don't change.)

Well, sieur, you may very well be right - I've disqualified myself already from passing specific judgement - but, surely, by the same standard, the invention of another world to comment on this one (Ballard's words, BTW) is hardly original to Mr. Heinlein, is it?

That was precisely not my point; the contrast between the worlds of Le Guin's novel is very much her own. It is the way in which the societies of the world are made real that she borrows from the SF tradition-and-dialogue.

Ballard is the toughest one, because so much of his SF is in a deliberate rejection of Campbell-Heinlein SF/F;

I would guess, once again, that it might be more of a matter of an expansion beyond these parameters rather than a rejection of them per se;

I agree with this ... What I had in mind was not that Ballard rejects Campbell-Heinlein SF per se so much as its governing values. He definitely participates, at least through the mid-'70s, in the ongoing dialogue.

[...]

I do agree with your contention that Ballard has used rhetorical and thematic devices which were employed by Heinlein and his contemporaries, especially in his earlier work, as you say...although ultimately to a very different end. (I find it interesting, BTW, that Ballard's status as an SF writer seems to be unquestioned, in contrast to that of WSB.)

Ballard is, almost, the inverse of Burroughs. Where Burroughs drives the subject into the objective, Ballard objectifies the subject, treating "mental states," "emotions," etc., as proper objects of scientific or pseudo-scientific examination; the subjective as such disappears in Ballard's rhetoric. This, I suggest, represents in essence an intensification and repurposing of the techniques of Campbell-Heinlein SF rhetoric.

General remarks: firstly, I do apologise to any Heinlein fans whose feathers or feelers I may have ruffled. I am sure that he deserves his stature, but unfortunately, I didn't read much Golden Age stuff in my vanished youth,

"The Golden Age of science fiction is 13."

-- Isaac Asimov

and the passage in 'Stranger' I've cited has pretty much put me off re-examining him for the present.

Somewhat akin, in my opinion, to giving up on Tolkien because of "Yrch!" cried Legolas, falling into his own tongue.

But as you say: Vita brevis. If you don't derive pleasure from RAH, don't waste your time reading him.

Re. Manson, please forgive my offhand remarks if they caused offense; nevertheless, I am a trifle confused about your correction. I was under the impression that Mr. Manson had read 'Stranger' well before his release from Terminal Island in 1967.

Many people are. After the murders, this rumor went around. Heinlein was very upset by it, and had his attorney look into the matter. The attorney found (or Heinlein claims he did, cf. GRUMBLES FROM THE GRAVE) that Manson had never in fact read STRANGER.

Some rumors are very persistent.

At any rate, as I already observed, he was well-misversed enough in the text to name his son Michael Valentine Manson...or are you saying that this did not happen?

Never having read a biography of Manson I have no idea what he named any children he may have fathered, or why, and so would not be so bold as to make that particular statement.

...the abuse is suggestive, given the nature of the text...it was also alleged that the Family referred to some of their murders as 'discorporations', despite their all-too-tangible and messy nature...

Not sure what it's "suggestive" of; even if Manson did in fact treat STRANGER as an inspirational text, the only thing this suggests to me is that a lunatic can find support for what he wants to do anyway in pretty much anything. My own religious tradition includes a shameful series of events called "the Inquisition," propelled by people who took the good news of Love and used it as an

excuse to act on their hate.

PS: _Every SF writer?_
Lem?

Lem clearly writes outside the dialog/tradition I'm speaking of, and in fact criticizes it as-a-whole (excepting, for reasons he makes clear in a few essays, Philip K. Dick).

The Russians?

Ditto ditto.

Mike Sakasegawa — 22 Apr 2003, 20:44 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Hello all! I'm new to posting on this list, but have been lurking for a couple of months. I have to say, you people constantly amaze me with your feats of analytical prowess.

Introductions having been completed, let me get on to content.

Blattid,

I found your post insightful and thorough, but it left me wondering whether GW's works fit very neatly into your SF paradigm. In many of his works he certainly seems to embrace the thematic elements

Haven't come up with a good Whorl name yet, so I'll sign with:

-Mike Sakasegawa

James Jordan — 22 Apr 2003, 23:44 · follows Mike Sakasegawa

Cool, blattid.

My working definition has been: Science fiction is fantasy literature that uses the beliefs of then-present establishment science and technology to accomplish its fantasy elements.

Explication: It's fantasy literature because it is not OUR world, whether in the future or in a parallel world or an alternate history. It uses the (changeable and changing) beliefs/models/paradigms of current establishment science, such as "you can't go faster than the speed of light." (Of course, there are exceptions; one might right a story in a non-Einsteinian universe building on alternate non-establishment science, or in a creationist universe; and there was that excellent novel a few years back, **Celestial Matters** by Richard Garfinkle -- a Lupine treat -- that was set in a Ptolemaic/Platonic universe.) In traditional fantasy, the other-worldly aspects are justified in terms of some kind of magic -- though in SF magical elements are sometimes introduced in terms of "psionic" powers, an aspect of SF devoid of establishment-science hypotheses.

From there I think your other points follow. Traditional "magical" fantasy will tend to generate a certain kind of writing, and so does SF.

The more interesting question, in some ways, is why writers like Michael Crichton, and some of Walker Percy's novels, are considered mainstream and not SF. I think it has to do mainly with who publishes them and how they are marketed.

FWIW. But how does this strike you?

Nutria

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 23 Apr 2003, 04:06 · follows James Jordan

Cool, blattid.

Thank you.

My working definition has been: Science fiction is fantasy literature that uses the beliefs of then-present establishment science and technology to accomplish its fantasy elements.

Explication: It's fantasy literature because it is not OUR world, whether in the future or in a parallel world or an alternate history.

Yes ...

... but ...

... _all_ fiction is set in a parallel world or alternate history.

This is perhaps an intensified way of stating the case, but I believe it is fundamentally accurate, with the semi-exception of hyper-autobiographical fiction like Proust's. Take -- say -- GONE WITH THE WIND. Even if (and I don't know) Margaret Mitchell did extensive research and got every detail of antebellum, war, and reconstruction Georgian and South Carolingian culture correct, it's set in an alternate world where there's a place called "Tara" inhabited by a woman named "Scarlett O'Hara." An insignificant difference from our world? Perhaps; but I wouldn't be surprised if, in _that_ world, Jimmy Carter was never elected governor of Georgia, let alone President of these hyah Newnited States ... the butterfly effect, donchaknow.

For that matter, historical novels using real characters take place in alternate realities even closer to ours.

The point is, of course, that all fiction partakes of the fantastic. (Mimetic fiction, pretty much alone among the genres, is ashamed of its fantastic nature and tries to hide it.)

It uses the (changeable and changing) beliefs/models/paradigms of current establishment science, such as "you can't go faster than the speed of light."

H'mmm. I posit that a lot of SF uses science for more than world- building; hard SF in particular uses it as an episteme ... which is why most hard SF has such wretched excuses for character(ization)s; SF may emphasize the object rather than the subject, but in hard SF, subjectivity is nearly nonexistent, and writers like Clement, Niven, and Forward strive for an absolutely objective approach to fiction in a way radically different from Ballard's objectification of the subject; where Ballard treats the subject as an object, these writers simply ignore it in the hope it will go away.

(Once upon a time I thought that Niven had actually created an engaging, interesting character in Ringworld's Louis Wu. Then I read the sequel and realized it was an accident.)

(And don't even get me started about Pournelle.)

(Of course, there are exceptions; one might right a story in a non-Einsteinian universe building on alternate non-establishment science, or in a creationist universe;

... or a universe based on the sephiroth of Kabbala, mayhap?

Just an idea. 8*)

and there was that excellent novel a few years back, *Celestial Matters* by Richard Garfinkle -- a Lupine treat -- that was set in a Ptolemaic/Platonic universe.)

I need to look that up. (Quickly adds it to the "find-me" list in his PDA.) Thanks for reminding me.

In traditional fantasy, the other-worldly aspects are justified in terms of some kind of magic -- though in SF magical elements are sometimes introduced in terms of "psionic" powers, an aspect of SF devoid of establishment-science hypotheses.

Oh, there's no shortage of establishment-science hypotheses about "psionics." They tend to be hypotheses about the honesty and/or sanity of people who believe in psi, or purport to.

Hey, I'm just sayin', is all ...

From there I think your other points follow. Traditional "magical" fantasy will tend to generate a certain kind of writing, and so does SF. The more interesting question, in some ways, is why writers like Michael Crichton, and some of Walker Percy's novels, are considered mainstream and not SF. I think it has to do mainly with who publishes them and how they are marketed.

Well, that has to do with my point about the multiordinal and multivalent nature of the term "SF" depending on its context. In publishing and marketing contexts, "SF" -- any genre -- is a pigeonhole, a way of categorizing books to target certain readerships. Crichton is published in a way that targets those who buy "best-selling (suspense/adventure) novels," the same market targeted by Tom Clancy. (H'mmm: "Red October," come to think of it, also has a certain SFnal quality to some of its thematics and even some of its rhetoric.)

For that matter you could ask the same question about Vonnegut.

A better question, to my mind, is how it happened that SF began regularly appearing on the bestseller lists.

FWIW. But how does this strike you?

I think you have a lot of interesting points here. Obviously, I didn't agree with all of them, but they're all interesting.

ArchD'Ikon Zibethicus — 23 Apr 2003, 10:51 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Blattid,

Thank you for taking the time and trouble to respond so comprehensively. My understanding is enriched as a consequence of your effort.

At the risk of staying off-list-topic - tho' not wholly - I feel compelled to make some response, tho' I will try to keep it short...

(I also echo your fair warning regarding topicality and length.)

I understand your initial working definition of SF to be, effectively, bounded by Gernsback and the didactic urge, and to have evolved into a 'genre' where it is possible to take linguistic and thematic ventures not usually found in MF - to adopt your term.

Thank you for clarifying this.

The example of the deliquescing/dilating door is a useful one for understanding how the language and concepts of SF differ from those of MF. It would appear, from what I understand you to be saying, that the casual assumption that the door dilates without the necessity for

invoking the Expository Lump is, in itself, one of the major achievements of SF as you have defined it. Do I understand you rightly?

I do remain confused, however, regarding the dichotomy between MF's subjectivity and SF's objectivity...I am currently leafing randomly through 'Nova Express' in pursuit of an understanding of the distinction...

And, in hopefully concise direct response:

Bierce is often cited as a generic ancestor of SF

Ah, well, that would explain it, then...

This implies a limitation to the possible/potential value of SF per se which I categorically reject.

I'm sorry; that was not at all what I was trying to suggest. Personally, I incline more to Ballard's view that SF is actually "the main literary tradition of the 20th century" (intro. to 'Crash' again), not to mention the 21st century...but, again, this is a question of just how the 'tradition' is to be defined.

Mr. Wolfe's work is a shining instance of the strength and power of SF...provided one concedes its membership of the category...

However, I certainly agree that a work can be both SF and something other than SF.

Now, you see, I would have to suggest that BotNS, for instance, is in this category - one reason being the 'subjectivity' of Severian's examination of his inner being, and its depicted development and growth, throughout the work.

To be influenced by ERB, then, is not to be influenced by SF at all.

(bows)

The sentence discussed in detail above is one example.

Yes, but could one not, perhaps, equally say that a sentence such as: "It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen[.]" was achieving a similar effect of displacement through a similar device?

Something like 3/4 of the way through the book, he briefly mentions, >in passing, the dark color of his skin.

Interesting...I missed that the first time around...

That was precisely _not_ my point; the contrast between the worlds of Le Guin's novel is very much her own. It is the way in which the societies of the world are made real that she borrows from the SF tradition-and-dialogue.

Ah, I understand you now! Thank you! But am I to further understand that (in saying that Le Guin "borrows from the SF tradition-and-dialogue") the implication is that 'The Dispossessed' is _not_ an SF novel in your opinion?

Or am I merely being obtuse again?

the subjective as such disappears in Ballard's rhetoric. This, I >suggest, represents in essence an intensification and repurposing of the techniques of Campbell-Heinlein STFnal rhetoric.

I _did_ quote Ballard's assertion that the task of the author has become "to invent the reality". To me, this really summarises one of the reasons why I feel vaguely uncomfortable with the concept of SF as a 'genre' or 'school' or 'style' or other category of literature. It would seem to me that Ballard was both extremely astute and highly prophetic in making this statement over

thirty years ago. We are now surrounded in our daily lives by the effective impedimenta of what was once 'SF'; computers, spaceflight, invasive monitoring for the dystopian-inclined...

Speaking with my professed lack of expertise on the subject, might this not possibly mean that the present day has become science-fictional in its nature? (I mean in the terms of the dilating door, so to speak...)

And cannot all contemporary MF literature be considered at least partly science-fictional insofar as it deals with these developments?

Somewhat akin, in my opinion, to giving up on Tolkien because of
"Yrch!" cried Legolas, falling into his own tongue.

But as you say: Vita brevis. If you don't derive pleasure from RAH, don't waste your time reading him.

No, no: you have convinced me that I may be doing him an injustice. I will pencil something of his other than 'Stranger' into my reading-list-after-the-current-twenty.

Not sure what it's "suggestive" of; even if Manson did in fact treat STRANGER as an inspirational text, the only thing this suggests to me is that a lunatic can find support for what he wants to do anyway in pretty much anything.

What I meant was that it was suggestive, at least to me, that the book's pernicious passages regarding sexuality as cited were unusually prone to abuse - in the hands of, as you so rightly say, a lunatic or at least a psychopath. I did take care to stipulate that I was certain that Mr. Heinlein never intended that 'Stranger' should be used in that fashion.

In any case, I made the connection in an off-hand and facetious moment. I'm sure that I may very well have been mistaken again, in any case.

Lem clearly writes outside the dialog/tradition I'm speaking of, and in fact criticizes it as-a-whole (excepting, for reasons he makes clear in a few essays, Philip K. Dick).

Now I must confess my confusion again; are you saying that you consider Lem to not be a SF writer in your definition of the term?

*

General remarks in very short: I think that, as Mike Sakasegawa said directly after your post, the question of whether Mr. Wolfe can be categorised as SF in these terms is a useful and intriguing one. Looking at BotNS, as I've already said, I suspect that the work does not lend itself to easy categorisation; for instance, I would guess that the story could still be told if much if not all of the actual advanced technology was omitted therefrom. Many of the concerns of the Book are philosophical and (pardon me) ontological and theological and ethical; moreover, in one sense, the Book could be argued to be founded on an illogical premise, inasmuch as according to what is known of the theory of evolution, humanity might reasonably be expected to have evolved into an entirely new species by the time the Urth reached the age given in the Book (as Olaf Stapledon suggested in his works).

Of course, Mr. Wolfe does take care to explain that the animals, at least, are very different to those of our day, even where they perform similar functions, and on considering this possibility in the light of your postings I can see no very compelling reason to rule out the possibility that the 'humans' of Severian's day are actually intended to be a different species to ourselves...provided we accept your theory that the inhabitants of the Jungle Garden are actually contemporary residents of Nessus who have been reprogrammed...as a theory, this

only leaves Pa. Silk's sighting of the original Palm Sunday during his enlightenment to be explained...but perhaps the physical changes are not profoundly obvious, especially from a distance.

At any rate, what I found when first reading BotNS was that I was experiencing a suspension of disbelief...the work was not necessarily scientifically convincing, but I was not reading it with those questions uppermost in my mind. I find it interesting that the publicity for 'Shadow' attempts to liken it to the Gormenghast trilogy, among other works, which was written by a poet and artist who was not pursuing scientific authenticity as opposed to suspension of disbelief.

*

Forgive me for ranting. Responding to your post has littered the diverse horizontal surfaces of my study/studio with even MORE books, and what passes for my mind with even MORE thoughts...as if I needed more clutter in either.

Thank you anyway, and my apologies to those whose bandwidth I am, in my turn, cluttering...

...back to normal programming...

->Zx<-

HEAVEN, n. A place where the wicked cease from troubling you with talk of their personal affairs, and the good listen with attention while you expound your own.

- Ambrose Bierce

The Hell Law says that Hell is reserved exclusively for them that believe in it. Further, the lowest Rung in Hell is reserved for them that believe in it on the supposition that they'll go there if they don't.

- The Honest Book of Truth, The Gospel According to Fred, 3:1

Josh Geller — 23 Apr 2003, 13:21 · follows ArchD'Ikon Zibethicus

On Tue, 22 Apr 2003, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:
... _all_ fiction is set in a parallel world or alternate history.

Good point.

Plenty of people never get this.

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matthew.malthouse — 23 Apr 2003, 14:17 · follows Josh Geller

On 23/04/2003 14:21:59 Josh Geller wrote:
On Tue, 22 Apr 2003, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:
... _all_ fiction is set in a parallel world or alternate history.

Good point.

Plenty of people never get this.

Is there a practical difference between a fictive universe which - apart from the fictional narrative - maps exactly against the real and one that does not?

Matthew

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 23 Apr 2003, 16:29 · follows matthew.malthouse

Matthew inquires:

Is there a practical difference between a fictive universe which - apart from the fictional narrative - maps exactly against the real and one that does not?

Can you show me a fictive universe which maps exactly against the real?

If so, how can you know it does?

(Note that I am, with courage and restraint, refraining from asking just what you mean by "real" anyway.)

James Jordan — 23 Apr 2003, 16:41 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

At 11:29 AM 4/23/2003, Blattid wrote:

Matthew inquires:

Is there a practical difference between a fictive universe which - apart from the fictional narrative - maps exactly against the real and one that does not?

Can you show me a fictive universe which maps exactly against the real?

Let me rephrase the question: A difference between a fictive universe that the author intends to correspond to the real world, and a fictive universe that introduces things that are not at present in the real world -- as the author understands the real world.

Nutria

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 23 Apr 2003, 17:42 · follows James Jordan

Fair warnings as before.

Pa.N. rephrases:

Let me rephrase the question: A difference between a fictive universe that the author intends to correspond to the real world, and a fictive universe that introduces things that are not at present in the real world -- as the author understands the real world.

Well, though I still wish to avoid the "real" question, I at least have some clue as to how to approach this. Further, I think I can mention Wolfe at least once in the process.

Short answer: I regard the difference as one of degree but note that an accumulation of small quantitative differences can be qualitatively transformative.

Long answer: I will, for the sake of argument, rephrase the question slightly more: instead of "things that are not in the real world," let us speak of "_types of_ things that are (or may not be)

at present, or in the past, in the real world." The purpose here is to avoid excessive reduction; looking at GWTW again, Tara and Scarlett O'Hara are obviously "things that are not in the real world," but it can reasonably be claimed that they are types of things that were, in the past, in the real world: the Southern Plantation and the Feisty Southern Belle With Serious Neurotic Twitches.

Over against that we can put ... well ... THE BOOK OF THE NEW SUN, which contains all sorts of types of things that don't exist and probably never will, from the analeptic alzado to Baldanders.

One's MF. One's SF (or "science fantasy," anyway). No argument, here. BOOK is a pretty extreme case, but it makes the point well.

I suggest, though, that the difference, what makes one MF and one SF, is less in the "content" -- i.e., the words of the text -- than it is in the way the words are read, in a Borgesian Pierre-Menard-ish way.

Let me borrow from Delany again.

Suppose you're reading an anthology of "the modern short story" and you come across a text that begins: "One morning, Gregor Samsa awoke from troubled dreams to find that he had become a giant insect."

[Note: I'm writing at work and don't have the text to hand. This is a (hopefully reasonable) paraphrase. And, yes, I know it's not a short story. This is for purposes of demonstration.]

How do you, reading an MF text, decode this? Most likely, as a metaphor, a comment on alienation, disfiguring disease, etc. As a reader of MF, you will ask questions about the subject-oriented aspects of Samsa's metamorphosis: what it means to him, what in his situation this represents, how it feels, how others respond to him, etc. To do otherwise is to miss the point of the MF text. Your reasonable expectation is that the author will, in the course of the text, explore these subject-oriented questions.

Now, suppose the next book you pick up is a collection of SF stories. Remarkably, in this anthology, you also come across a text that begins: "One morning, Gregor Samsa awoke from troubled dreams to find that he had become a giant insect."

How do you, reading an SF text, decode this? Most likely, by inquiring into the causes and consequences of the transformation. As a reader of SF, you will ask questions about the object-oriented aspects of Samsa's metamorphosis: how it came about, how he can survive under the circumstances (square-cube law and all that, y'know), the socioeconomic impact of a giant, sentient insect upon society, etc. To do otherwise is to miss the point of an SF text. Your reasonable expectation is that the author will, in the course of the text, answer at least some of these object-oriented questions.

Note that these are generalizations. The SF writer can in fact explore the subject-oriented questions as well. The MF writer might offer causal mechanisms or consider consequences. (Genre is after all a non-exclusive adjective, not an exclusive and pigeonholing noun). But in each case, that isn't the expectation: if they're neglected or passed over lightly, the reader does not feel cheated.

"Passed over lightly": Consider Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s STFnal mechanisms as an example of object-oriented concerns in MF, and the millimeter-thin "characterization" efforts of Arthur C.

Clarke as an example of subject-oriented concerns in SF. Neither writer is the worse for their shallow and silly answers to questions that are, finally, not the questions their texts are concerned with.

But if a writer chooses to neglect the concerns that are proper to the genre in which she presents her text, woe, woe, nine times woe unto her! A writer who wrote an SF text that began with a transformation like Samsa's and did not explore the question of how it happened -- mind you, she needn't answer the question*, but she must attend to it -- will earn the just wrath of her readers.

* SF is full of unexplained wonders; perhaps the most blatant example would be RENDEZVOUS WITH RAMA, a text which is firmly STFnal despite its ultimate failure to explain much of anything, because it's deeply concerned with the questions it fails to answer.

At this point someone will bring up Michael Bishop's "Rogue Tomato." Pfui. That's a romp, and a grand one, but is not SF. Stuff just happens. (I mean, for Pete's sake ... Birds flying in the vacuum of space ...)

Which brings us, by a commodious vicus of riorulation, to Wolfe.

Wolfe, I suggest, is not only firmly but fussily in the STFnal tradition in most of his work, and especially the SUN sequence. While the texts in question are rich in their coverage of the characters' subjective lives, they are ultimately object-oriented; they take place in a universe where the "meaning" of things and events is the events themselves, and not how they serve to reflect and comment on the characters' psyches. Further, when presenting what I, subjectively, regard as plainly miraculous, Wolfe seems to take a special glee in providing an out -- in giving or hinting at a "scientific," object-oriented explanation for the events.

Then there's the question of narrative reliability. Of course this is

a question of subject, but does not in itself make the text subject-oriented. The concerns of the text are still in the realm of the object: what happened, why, what are the (physical, socioeconomic) consequences. That Wolfe also explores the realm of the subject (that is, the events mean something to and about the characters) does not change or detract from this: it makes Wolfe a richer writer, one whose SF is also something else ... but still SF.

(Here we get into theology, btw; I don't want to drag this out in detail, because this isn't a religion list: but it can reasonably be taken that God is pure subject, and over against God we are all objects; the play of subject/object in Wolfe thus becomes very complex indeed.)

H'mmm. One last attempt to clarify this subject/object thing and I'll quit. By saying a text is "oriented" toward one or other side of this (highly permeable) bar, I'm asking what it interrogates -- rather, what the reader interrogates, what questions the reader reasonably asks of the text to produce a rich and interesting reading. Asking about the mechanism by which Gregor Samsa is turned into a giant blattidaean is approximately as valid as asking why Typhon is such a bastard. You can ask, but the text won't respond. In both cases, the real concerns of the text are elsewhere. Kafka is concerned with Samsa as a subject, and the text repays questions on that level. Wolfe is concerned with Typhon as an objective presence in Severian's

world, and the text repays questions on _that_ level.

Which is, finally, why readers schooled in the classics of MF find some of SF's finest texts "impoverished": they ask the wrong questions of the text and are unhappy when the questions go unanswered.

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 23 Apr 2003, 19:05 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

My reply to Pa.Nutria, I hope, answered Mike Sakesegawa's question, and some of ArchD'Ikon Zibethicus' also. But Zibethicus asks other questions I want to address.

Usual warnings apply in the usual way. Yes, there is Lupine content somewhere below. 8*)

I understand your initial working definition of SF to be, effectively, bounded by Gernsback and the didactic urge, and to have evolved into a 'genre' where it is possible to take linguistic and thematic ventures not usually found in MF - to adopt your term.

H'mmm. With a repeated insistance that the "bounding" is fuzzy, yes.

The example of the deliquescing/dilating door is a useful one for understanding how the language and concepts of SF differ from those of MF. It would appear, from what I understand you to be saying, that the casual assumption that the door dilates without the necessity for invoking the Expository Lump is, in itself, one of the major achievements of SF as you have defined it. Do I understand you rightly?

At a first approximation. The point here is somewhat more though; it's that the writers of SF have come to assume readers of SF, readers schooled in decoding and unpacking a sentence like "The door dilated," who will recognize the _implied_ Expository Lump.

(There's an interesting trick some writers, faced with the necessity of an EL, sometimes pull: They have one character begin to expose the matter. The character is then interrupted by another, who says, "Don't insult my intelligence! I know perfectly well that ..." and continues the exposition. I regard this as an excessively cute wink to the reader, the writer intruding on his text and saying, "Look, I know this is an annoying hunk of exposition, bear with me, okay?" The late Isaac Asimov did this kind of thing far too much.)

I do remain confused, however, regarding the dichotomy between MF's subjectivity and SF's objectivity...I am currently leafing randomly through 'Nova Express' in pursuit of an understanding of the distinction...

Well, it's been a while since I've read Burroughs, but ... I think it's fair to say that, for example, his Venusian jungles are not really about Venusian jungles at all (and in fact frequently get bled with South American jungles); they're about the experience of being in a certain condition that the heat and wet and danger of the jungle represents. Burroughs' early novels are, first and foremost, "about" a highly subjective matter indeed: the Condition of Absolute Need. Addiction in its broadest sense (where addiction to drugs is only one example).

[...]

This implies a limitation to the possible/potential value of SF per se which I categorically reject.

I'm sorry; that was not at all what I was trying to suggest. Personally, I incline more to Ballard's view that SF is actually "the main literary tradition of the 20th century" (intro. to 'Crash' again), not to mention the 21st century...but, again, this is a question of just how the 'tradition' is to be defined.

You know, my edition of "Crash" doesn't seem to have that intro. I bought it a loooooong time ago. It must have been added in later (possibly post-Cronenberg?) editions.

Mr. Wolfe's work is a shining instance of the strength and power of SF...provided one concedes its membership of the category...

See the other message.

However, I certainly agree that a work can be both SF and something other than SF.

Now, you see, I would have to suggest that BotNS, for instance, is in this category - one reason being the 'subjectivity' of Severian's examination of his inner being, and its depicted development and growth, throughout the work.

Well, yes. As I said, I don't intend the subject/object thing as an absolute, but as a pointer regarding how the text is most "usefully" read. Note that even when we talk about Severian's personality we're inclined to talk about objective matters in relation to it: how the Hieros (and others?) manipulate spacetime to shape him, for example. In SF, the psyche itself often becomes an object, and projects itself into the "objective" world of the text via "psi" powers and the like.

The sentence discussed in detail above is one example.

Yes, but could one not, perhaps, equally say that a sentence such as: "It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen[,]" was achieving a similar effect of displacement through a similar device?

Yes. One could and I would. NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR, though not actually written in the SF domain*, is clearly written by someone who has at least paid attention to the questions SF asks, and strives to perform some of the same tasks. If some of it is a tad clumsy -- Orwell does indeed stop the book to exposit at times -- nonetheless it's a remarkable production, written before the Campbell-Heinlein had really taken off in the domains of SF proper. Then, NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR is also very much concerned with objective, "outer" things -- it isn't really about Winston Smith; it's about Ingsoc, its primary areas of concern are socioeconomic.

* Incidentally, the fact that an "outsider" had written this text created a kind of resentment among some SF purists. A good, and somewhat funny, attempt to prove that NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR is not good SF at all can be found in ASIMOV ON SCIENCE FICTION.

Something like 3/4 of the way through the book, he briefly mentions, >in passing, the dark color of his skin.

Interesting...I missed that the first time around...

Many do; it's very casual indeed.

That was precisely not my point; the contrast between the worlds of Le Guin's novel is very much her own. It is the way in which the societies of the world are made real that she borrows from the SF tradition-and-dialogue.

Ah, I understand you now! Thank you! But am I to further understand that (in saying that Le Guin "borrows from the SF tradition-and-dialogue") the implication is that 'The Dispossessed' is not an SF novel in your opinion? Or am I merely being obtuse again?

No, I wrote badly. I should have said that Le Guin uses the tools of the SF t-and-d; THE DISPOSSESSED is very much part of that ongoing conversation. (Delany --

who _will_ keep popping up in my discussions of SF-as-genre -- deliberately set one of his novels in dialog with THE DISPOSSESSED -- (TROUBLE ON) TRITON -- by giving it a subtitle which reflects Le Guin's; though it was mostly-written before he had read THE DISPOSSESSED, it addresses many of the same concerns, in a radically different way, and so forms part of the same "thread.")

the subjective as such disappears in Ballard's rhetoric. This, I >suggest, represents in essence an intensification and repurposing of the techniques of Campbell-Heinlein SFnal rhetoric.

I _did_ quote Ballard's assertion that the task of the author has become "to invent the reality". To me, this really summarises one of the reasons why I feel vaguely uncomfortable with the concept of SF as a 'genre' or 'school' or 'style' or other category of literature. It would seem to me that Ballard was both extremely astute and highly prophetic in making this statement over thirty years ago. We are now surrounded in our daily lives by the effective impedimenta of what was once 'SF'; computers, spaceflight, invasive monitoring for the dystopian-inclined...

Yes. While SF is not oracular, it is prophetic. That is, it does not (except occasionally, and by accident) predict the specifics of the future (_nobody_ predicted the PC revolution), but it does "speak forth" the possibilities, probabilities, and dangers of the future. In so doing, it addresses, not the future, but the here-and-now (and -- if the writer is good or lucky -- the eternal. Books of the hour, books for the ages). Every decade or so SF needs a kind of revolution, because many of the futures it's been talking about are no longer relevant to the present world-that-is-the-case.

Speaking with my professed lack of expertise on the subject, might this not possibly mean that the present day has become science-fictional in its nature? (I mean in the terms of the dilating door, so to speak...)

I suggest reading Thomas M. Disch's excellent (if kind of pissy) nonfiction book THE DREAMS OUR STUFF IS MADE OF. He addresses this question far better than I can in the space of an email.

And cannot all contemporary MF literature be considered at least partly science-fictional insofar as it deals with these developments?

Some does. Some doesn't. Romance novels, for example, generally don't. Technothrillers -- what Crichton, really, writes -- generally do. (An interesting read in this respect is Donna Haraway's essay "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," in that it takes massive amounts of the material of SF and repurposes it for the subject.)

If you don't derive pleasure from RAH, don't waste your time reading him.

No, no: you have convinced me that I may be doing him an injustice. I will pencil something of his other than 'Stranger' into my reading-list-after-the-current-twenty.

H'mmm. Your choice. My own feeling is that you probably will have the same experience; no writer is to everyone's taste, and RAH isn't to a lot of people's.

To follow the argument I've been making, you'd be best off with his SF of the '30s and '40s.

Given what I've gathered of your taste, though, I would expect that you'd be most actually _enjoy_ (if you can get hold of it) the paperback collection variously titled 6 X H or THE UNPLEASANT PROFESSION OF JONATHAN HOAG. Failing that, its contents are, I believe, completely encapsulated in the larger and more recent FANTASIES OF RAH.

Not sure what it's "suggestive" of; even if Manson did in fact treat STRANGER as an inspirational text, the only thing this suggests to me is

that a lunatic can find support for what he wants to do anyway in pretty much anything.

What I meant was that it was suggestive, at least to me, that the book's pernicious passages regarding sexuality as cited were unusually prone to abuse - in the hands of, as you so rightly say, a lunatic or at least a psychopath.

OK, I can buy that. Power fantasies -- which STRANGER very much is (at least at some levels) -- tend to attract such people.

Lem clearly writes outside the dialog/tradition I'm speaking of, and in fact criticizes it as-a-whole (excepting, for reasons he makes clear in a few essays, Philip K. Dick).

Now I must confess my confusion again; are you saying that you consider Lem to not be a SF writer in your definition of the term?

No, I'm not saying that, or not exactly. Back to the repeated use of "fuzzily bounded" in my original definition. Lem's in the fuzzy area. He has clearly read a lot of Anglo-American SF, and his participation in the "dialog" is as a kind of iconoclast who doesn't accept many of its terms.

Looking at BotNS, [...] I would guess that the story could still be told if much if not all of the actual advanced technology was omitted therefrom.

H'mmm. I don't think that this story could be told, but a story that was pretty similar at the level of plot could be told in a purely fantastic realm, certainly. However, it would be very different indeed in its (as you rightly observe) ontological concerns. Because it takes place in a possible future of our world -- as Wolfe calls it, the "do-nothing" future -- tBotNS exists in a particular kind of dialogic tension with our world.

TBotNS takes place, actually, in a very specific kind of possible future -- one that we might call "the mythic future" in the sense that LORD OF THE RINGS and the Arthurian cycle take place in "the mythic past," an ahistorical past whose relation to our present is epistemic rather than ontic, if you follow me. So too with the SUN future; we are, I believe, its "mythic past."

Many of the concerns of the Book are philosophical and (pardon me) ontological and theological and ethical; moreover, in one sense, the Book could be argued to be founded on an illogical premise, inasmuch as according to what is known of the theory of evolution, humanity might reasonably be expected to have evolved into an entirely new species by the time the Urth reached the age given in the Book (as Olaf Stapledon suggested in his works).

Well, some species stay (at least roughly) the same for a longish time: cockroaches (h'mm, the blattidae seem to be coming up in this conversation today, don't they?), sharks, coelocanths, etc. In addition, given the genetic engineering hinted at in some of the rebuilt or recreated animals (arctothurs, destriers, etc.), it's clear that, for a long time, humanity in the SUN future had serious control of genetics, which would in turn imply the ability to control its own genetic destiny. Even in the decadent times of the Autarchy, biological technology far beyond what we can do today is clearly still possible to those with the will and the resources: viz. Baldanders. And since this is, as just noted, Wolfe's conception of the "do-nothing" future, it seems reasonable to suppose that humanity, by and large, preserved its genetic identity rather than mucking about with it or letting evolution have its way.

Conclusion: I don't think the premise in question is particularly illogical, given the SUN world's deeper premises.

Of course, Mr. Wolfe does take care to explain that the _animals_, at least, are very different to those of our day, even where they perform similar functions,

He also takes care to explain that many of them are human creations. See above.

and on considering this possibility in the light of your postings I can see no very compelling reason to rule out the possibility that the 'humans' of Severian's day are actually intended to be a different species to ourselves...

This is possible but kind of a "so what?" hypothesis. Since we have no specific differences to point at, they're human enough for purposes of psychological "identification" by the reader.

provided we accept your theory that the inhabitants of the Jungle Garden are actually contemporary residents of Nessus who have been reprogrammed...as a theory, this only leaves Pa. Silk's sighting of the original Palm Sunday during his enlightenment to be explained...but perhaps the physical changes are not profoundly obvious, especially from a distance.

Not just Palm Sunday. Didn't he also see the Crucifixion?

Actually, the later SUN books might benefit from us supposing that the "humans" aboard the Whorl (and possibly on Urth) have been genetically engineered in a way that makes them more subject to certain kinds of intrusion by dictators -- that would give us at least a vague way of explaining the uploading/downloading of personalities through the eyes!

At any rate, what I found when first reading BotNS was that I was experiencing a suspension of disbelief...the work was not necessarily scientifically convincing, but I was not reading it with those questions uppermost in my mind.

H'mmm. Really? I found that in my first reading I was _fascinated_ by object-oriented questions, from the socioeconomics of the Guilds, the Autarch, etc. -- regarding which, if I'm not mistaken, Wolfe gives us a tantalizingly brief appendix, or maybe it was a chapter in CASTLE OF THE OTTER? -- to the ...

Oh, hell. Here's a great example of the object level, and Wolfe's use of STFnal language tricks: the Mountains. When Severian first speaks of heading for "the mountains," most readers will visualize something like the Andes, the Alps, or the Appalachians, no? Then as we learn about the depleted nature of the Urth, and Severian begins to travel away from Thrax, we have the image of these huge trash heaps. Finally, we get to the true "Mountains," and they're bluidy fookin great monumental sculptures. Gaaaah! The point here is that we've been forced to radically revise our definition of what the word "mountain" means in this culture twice.

I find it interesting that the publicity for 'Shadow' attempts to liken it to the Gormenghast trilogy, among other works, which was written by a poet and artist who was not pursuing scientific authenticity as opposed to suspension of disbelief.

(Why is scientific authenticity opposed to suspension of disbelief? Scientific authenticity is, rather, a tool in service of suspension of disbelief.)

I don't recall those comparisons, but it's an interesting pairing. Both deal with decadent societies in vast crumbling edifices, where one's role is predetermined from birth, and feature principal characters who rebel against their roles. H'mmm.

Forgive me for ranting.

Rant on, friend. This has been a most interesting conversation for me also, and apparently for several others who've jumped in.

Jason Ingram — 23 Apr 2003, 19:07 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

I think there are problems with fetishizing the "real" in this sense--reading old anthropology, or even contemporary historical accounts, presents interpretations of reality that are less true in some respects than fiction. Fiction might provide a better account of subjective experiences than the technical discursive style employed in much non-fictional writing (e.g. attempts to use stream of consciousness writing to "map" the process of thought with more fidelity than journalistic descriptions or historical 'black box' accounts).

Of course, fiction *is* fictional, and usually doesn't purport to be an accurate description of something that has actually happened, but I don't think that positing the possibility of a one-to-one correspondence with some reality (whether transcendent or immanent) is a good starting point.

Examining the *function* of discourses might be helpful. Sorry if I'm being cryptic; I'm frantically trying to finish up a project.

(I don't exactly have a dog in this fight, but I prefer "speculative fiction" as a designation. I would feel like Terry Eagleton does when he tries to define "literature" were I to attempt to define SF.)

Sepia

On Wednesday, April 23, 2003, at 09:29 AM, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:
Matthew inquires:

Is there a practical difference between a fictive universe which -
apart
from the fictional narrative - maps exactly against the real and one
that
does not?

Can you show me a fictive universe which maps exactly against the real?

If so, how can you know it does?

(Note that I am, with courage and restraint, refraining from asking
just
what you mean by "real" anyway.)

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 23 Apr 2003, 19:44 · follows Jason Ingram

Sepia writes:

I think there are problems with fetishizing the "real" in this sense--reading old anthropology, or even contemporary historical accounts, presents interpretations of reality that are less true in some respects than fiction. Fiction might provide a better account of subjective experiences than the technical discursive style employed in much non-fictional writing (e.g. attempts to use stream of consciousness writing to "map" the process of thought with more fidelity than journalistic descriptions or historical 'black box' accounts).

...taken to its (logical?) conclusion, this line of thought may lead us to conclude that all texts are in some important sense fiction, that "history," "biography," "corporate annual reports,"

"scientific papers," etc., all describe fictive "genres."

In the case of corporate reports, I'll gladly concede the point. 8*)

Well: No text completely or perfectly reflects "reality." The texts we call nonfiction are perhaps more revealing in the (often relevant) aspects of "reality" they omit than the ones they include. This is particularly revelatory of the author's purpose or agenda.

But ... well, I just finished reading the two volumes (so far) of Morris' biography of Theodore Roosevelt. In what sense is this "fiction?" It selects details. It speculates, but attempts to make clear where speculation is taking place. I just don't know.

Of course, fiction *is* fictional, and usually doesn't purport to be an accurate description of something that has actually happened,

Ummm. Not entirely true ... consider Proust again. Is *Remembrance of Things Past* really more fictional than the average text of history or biography? Why or why not?

but I don't think that positing the possibility of a one-to-one correspondence with some reality (whether transcendent or immanent) is a good starting point.

A starting point for, uh, what?

Examining the *function* of discourses might be helpful.

I think this is not entirely alien to my idea that suggestion (in NYRSF last year, and more than hinted at in this ongoing discussion) that the most important difference between SF and MF is what the reader expects.

(I don't exactly have a dog in this fight, but I prefer "speculative fiction" as a designation. I would feel like Terry Eagleton does when he tries to define "literature" were I to attempt to define SF.)

This is why I prefer the term SF. Like MF, it's ambiguous; it can contain both "science" and "speculative" fiction ... not to mention San Francisco. 8*)

Jason Ingram — 23 Apr 2003, 20:33 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

I agree with most of Blattid's response. A couple of clarifications:

Blattid writes:

Well: No text completely or perfectly reflects "reality." The texts we call nonfiction are perhaps more revealing in the (often relevant) aspects of "reality" they omit than the ones they include. This is particularly revelatory of the author's purpose or agenda.

But ... well, I just finished reading the two volumes (so far) of Morris' biography of Theodore Roosevelt. In what sense is this "fiction?" It selects details. It speculates, but attempts to make clear where speculation is taking place. I just don't know.

I would use a different metaphor than that of a mirror reflecting reality. Perhaps a lens or filter. I wouldn't say that biographies are necessarily fiction, but rather that they fail the (misleading) test of "correspondence with reality" in *some* respects. For instance: representation of thoughts, anachronistic terminology, smoothing out the ambiguity facing historical agents. Not that lists of facts compiled into a coherent narrative progression and centered on the life of an important individual lack value; far from it. But Fernand Braudel writes history in a completely different vein; instead of arguing that his historical approach is more--or less--accurate, it

seems more productive to focus on what useful aspects his approach reveals (as well as what it may conceal).

Ummm. Not entirely true ... consider Proust again. Is *Remembrance of Things Past* really more fictional than the average text of history or biography? Why or why not?

I would guess that Proust's quasi-autobiography does not present certain truth claims characteristic of histories and autobiographies. These claims are largely implicit and tacit; conventions differ. I wouldn't rate these differences along a continuum of "more or less fictional." Naturalistic fiction might claim to be a "more accurate" depiction of reality than journalistic accounts; I think this is a useful distinction that Blattid points to, and that I try to tap into by talking about the function of discourses. A bit more on this below.

(I write, and Blattid responds:)

but I don't think that positing the possibility of a one-to-one correspondence with some reality (whether transcendent or immanent) is a good starting point.

A starting point for, uh, what?

Discussion and analysis. Although I probably should have avoided the language of starting points and such. So: Starting out by classifying genres in terms of their correspondence to truth may not be that useful (e.g. Math and propositional logic and Holy texts correspond most closely to reality; economic texts and statistics and engineering journals are second in rank; history and travel guides and maps are third; biology, philosophy and biography are fourth; news reports and dictionaries are fifth; MF sixth; SF seventh; political speeches eighth; lovers' pleas and poetry last). It's not useless, but it adopts a problematic view of reality.

As I said, I think we essentially agree.

Sepia

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 23 Apr 2003, 22:12 · follows Jason Ingram

Sepia ends by writing:

As I said, I think we essentially agree.

I think you're right, and so will cut to a few points where ... well, we don't necessarily *disagree* but perhaps emphasize different aspects. And I have some serious unanswered questions.

I would use a different metaphor than that of a mirror reflecting reality.
Perhaps a lens or filter.

Prism, mirror, lens. The apparently obligatory Delany reference for this note.

I wouldn't say that biographies are necessarily fiction, but rather that they fail the (misleading) test of "correspondence with reality" in *some* respects.

H'mmm. At this point I have to ask the questions I've been unasking throughout this discussion. I don't like these questions, I suspect them of being inherently unanswerable. But:

Correspondence with ... what?

And what does "correspond" mean in this context?

Unless and until someone answers those questions, which I don't see anyone doing real soon, any "correspondence with reality test" seems to me not only misleading, but meaningless.

This isn't sophomore posing; I know intuitively what I mean when I talk about reality. Phil Dick probably had the best answer: "What doesn't go away when I ignore it." (Or words pretty similar.) But that's not particularly useful for testing against.

A text is (must I really say this?) a shaped thing, shaped for some purpose(s). A Republican and a Marxian could write histories of the same period, which would have almost nothing in common, each with the highest concern for "accuracy" and "correspondence to reality." Each will doubtless consider the other to have written inaccurate histories with very little "correspondence to reality." Can we actually say that either of them is "right"? (Well, yes, I suppose we can, if we're Republicans or Marxians.) With the best intent, the two will write books about very different "realities," because they live in very different realities.

H'mmm. Another disclaimer seems necessary here: I do in fact believe in an absolutely real, objective world. But I am quite certain that none of us perceives it, as such. The Marxian and the Republican, hard-headed realists both, perceive it in such different terms that I can't believe either of them is "right," and, alas, can't convince myself that anyone else is either.

All of which is ... I think ... very relevant indeed to Wolfe and his "unreliable narrators."

I would guess that Proust's quasi-autobiography does not present certain truth claims characteristic of histories and autobiographies.

I think I agree with this. And would add that I think it makes certain (implicit) truth claims not characteristic of histories and (auto)biographies.

These claims are largely implicit and tacit; conventions differ. I wouldn't rate these differences along a continuum of "more or less fictional."

Well, not a linear continuum, anyway. I think it's "continuous" in that there isn't a quantized measure of "fictionality," but not linear in that there are multiple dimensions of truth/fictionality. Asking whether "Temps Perdu" is "more" fictional than, say, Carter's biography of Proust is kind of like asking whether twenty kilograms is greater or less than five cubic meters.

Perhaps it's time to introduce the distinction between the factual, the real, and the true into the discussion? Anyone want to try to shave that particular barber?

(Personally, I find "fact/truth" to be a particularly useful distinction: e.g., I will happily call the Genesis accounts of Creation, with all their intercontradictions, true, but not by any means factual. But it's pointless to talk about whether the account is "real" ... obviously, if accounts can be "real," then it's a "real" account. We can encounter it in the world.

But try defining those terms usefully.)

[...]

Starting out by classifying genres in terms of their correspondence to truth may not be that useful [...] It's not useless, but it adopts a problematic view of reality.

What view of "reality" is not problematic?

Jason Ingram — 24 Apr 2003, 00:33 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Blattid raises some good points. I'll try to address one.

Blattid:

H'mmm. At this point I have to ask the questions I've been unasking throughout this discussion. I don't like these questions, I suspect them of being inherently unanswerable. But:

Correspondence with ... what?

And what does "correspond" mean in this context?

Unless and until someone answers those questions, which I don't see anyone doing real soon, any "correspondence with reality test" seems to me not only misleading, but meaningless.

If I say that Texas is smaller than Rhode Island, my statement doesn't, on face, correspond with reality. Similarly, stating that water boils at 30 degrees Centigrade doesn't correspond with reality. This leaves unanswered the question of what "reality" is.

I think it's meaningful, useful, and often necessary to talk about historical accuracy even though I would argue that perspective and a host of other factors tend to make common-sense discussions of "objective facts" misleading, if not meaningless. Different levels of analysis: objectivity is a myth, but I don't want news reporters to be excessively biased.

The bogeyman of positivism lurks in the background, along with early attempts to come up with a neutral language that could allow unambiguous communication. The ideal was to develop a language with a one-to-one correspondence between words and things. Possibly a straw-dog.

I think I lean closer towards a view of reality as a construction than I do towards a notion that there is a really real reality out there, even if we can't attain true knowledge of it (Kant's approach). So, I'm not partial to using "correspondence with reality" as a framework for cataloguing writing. Prism/lens, I suppose.

I'll defer discussion of how different conceptions of "reality" might be more or less problematic. One small reason I like Wolfe so much is that he leaves plenty of space open for interpretation, and yet also does a very good job of crafting a naturalistic style. Many protagonists are also authors, who disseminate their work across the universe. Their styles differ, and are appropriate to the situation. Horn conceals some information from the reader because his papers might be read by enemies, for instance.

Sepia

matthew.malthouse — 24 Apr 2003, 07:56 · follows Jason Ingram

On 23/04/2003 17:29:07 Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:
Matthew inquires:

Is there a practical difference between a fictive universe which - apart from the fictional narrative - maps exactly against the real and one that does not?

Can you show me a fictive universe which maps exactly against the real?

If so, how can you know it does?

When a character in a Ruth Rendell thriller walks a London street near my home I can too. When Graves' Claudius refers to the Sybiline prophesies I can recall the cave complex of the Cumean Sybil I visited in February. Taking a plane or driving car are possible.

While character and narrative might in varying degrees be creations of the author their milieu is something we can experience.

But tracing Severian's walk through Nessus, buying a copy of A Lancre Witch's Cookbook direct from the Guild of Engravers, getting to work by transporter or taking a holiday on a GSV... these are somewhat out of reach.

Worlds with deliquescing doors and worlds with hinges.

Matthew

Gareth Jelley — 24 Apr 2003, 13:14 · follows matthew.malthouse

From: "Dan'l Danehy-Oakes" <katbarx at hotmail.com>

Can you show me a fictive universe which maps exactly against the real?

If so, how can you know it does?

But there are differing degrees of 'mapping', if you see what I mean. I highly 'realist' or 'naturalistic' narrative like an Old Norse saga is going to map its fictive world far more closely to what it knows as the 'real' world than other narratives that have no interest in being at realistic or naturalistic...

Clearly, you can never have a completely 'real' representation of a world in a narrative (whether it be a fictional or non-fictional narrative for that matter) because it will always be a 'representation' of the thing, not the thing itself; but clearly some fictions are trying far harder to map onto the real world than others...

Best Wishes,

G.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 24 Apr 2003, 17:13 · follows Gareth Jelley

Me:

Correspondence with ... what?

And what does "correspond" mean in this context?

Sepia:

If I say that Texas is smaller than Rhode Island, my statement doesn't, on face, correspond with reality. Similarly, stating that water boils at 30 degrees Centigrade doesn't correspond with reality. This leaves unanswered the question of what "reality" is.

Actually, I think what it fails to correspond with is fact. Reality, truth, fact: three different concepts that need to be distinguished clearly.

Something that can be stated compactly sense and can be verified (or falsified) by empirical means is fact (or fallacy). "Water boils at 100C" is a near-fact; it becomes a fact if you add some conditions

-- for example, it's verifiable that water boils at 100C, in a standard atmosphere, at sea-level

pressure. "Rhode Island is bigger than Texas" is a fallacy for most meanings of "big," but it really wants a dimension: "has a greater surface area," "population," etc., to make it verifiable/falsifiable.

Something that compactly states the experience of our existence is truth. "Water boils at 100C" isn't really a truth, we don't experience things that way. "Boiling water is hot enough to scald you" is a truth. The relative sizes of Rhode Island and Texas aren't really something most of us experience unless we're given to long road trips, and have little to do with "truth."

"Reality," now ... perhaps that's what you verify and falsify against, that's what we have experience of. Or do we? I have experiences in a dream; are they experiences of "reality"? (Mind you, I don't question whether they're "real" experiences.) How can we classify such experiences -- if indeed we can at all?

I suggest that "reality" falls under the ban of Wittgenstein's seventh proposition.

Let's drag Wolfe back into this, shall we?

In the discursive world of tBotNS, these are facts: Severian is pricked by a rose. He recognizes the thorn as the Claw. He has certain insights. He takes his boots off and throws them into the water.

In the same discursive world (and, I believe, in ours) this is truth: Everything is sacred because it comes from the hand of the Creator.

But what, in that discursive world, is real?

We get into a category error when we use the concept of "reality" in discussing a fictional text -- that is, when we discuss any text at the level of fiction. The world of discourse is precisely not "real" -- though the text which embodies the discourse clearly is a "real" text. (But is the discourse, is any discourse, "real?" What does it mean to call a discourse "real?")

One difference between fact and truth is that you can alter fact at will in creating discursive worlds, and remain in good faith with the text and the (hypothetical, hypostasized) reader; if you alter truth, you enter into a condition of bad faith with the reader, the text, or both.

I think it's meaningful, useful, and often necessary to talk about historical accuracy even though I would argue that perspective and a host of other factors tend to make common-sense discussions of "objective facts" misleading, if not meaningless.

Au contraire, I suggest that "common sense" is the only meaningful way to discuss "fact." We can only speak of fact in the realm of the sensory, what we sense in common, what we can empirically test and agree on -- the consensual. Anything else fails the test of "fact." Pure "objectivity" may be a chimera, but we can choose to attend primarily to the objective (or the subjective).

"Historical accuracy..." in fiction? If a historical account is always biased, then how much more is history-in-acknowledge-fiction? Fiction is not -- pace Gernsback -- a learning pill, we don't read or write it to learn or teach scientific or historical or other facts; it does however serve didactic purposes. If I read a novel where the Holocaust never happened, am I reading an alternate history, or a piece of MF written by someone who subscribes to the theories of Aryan Nation?

How can I know the difference?

(Or: Might it be -- would it even be possible for someone to write -- an intelligent and mature novel which is neither, a conspiracy novel on the level of FOUCAULT'S PENDULUM or, less grandiosely, ILLUMINATUS!, which takes as its premise that the Holocaust _was_ a huge conspiratorial fraud?)

Different levels of analysis: objectivity is a myth, but I don't want news reporters to be excessively biased.

Since all reporters are, willy-nilly, biased, I prefer a reporter who is open about her bias.

The bogeyman of positivism lurks in the background, along with early attempts to come up with a neutral language that could allow unambiguous communication. The ideal was to develop a language with a one-to-one correspondence between words and things. Possibly a straw-dog.

Unless one were to create a language with an infinite vocabulary, it's not merely a straw-dog but a chimera. I have little truck with positivism, but that doesn't mean we need to throw objectivity out the window. "I cannot achieve perfection; but, I can choose to serve perfection." Similarly: I cannot achieve true objectivity in my utterances, but I can choose to direct my utterances to the object.

I think I lean closer towards a view of reality as a construction

I guess the question I want to ask of this view is, what was there before language existed to construct "reality" from?

Does (say) a dog not exist in a reality? A planarian?

One small reason I like Wolfe so much is that he leaves plenty of space open for interpretation, and yet also does a very good job of crafting a naturalistic style.

Complete agreement.

Many protagonists are also authors, who disseminate their work across the universe.

? ? ?

Severian does this. Who else? Well, Horn disseminates his work across Blue, as do his sons; but Weer and Latro write purely for themselves. Holly Hollander, I suppose, would like to disseminate hers.

Their styles differ, and are appropriate to the situation. Horn conceals some information from the reader because his papers might be read by enemies, for instance.

I think one of my favorite things about Wolfe is his tendency to invent a new style for every novel. You'd never read a page of Heinlein and not know right away, "This is Heinlein." When a new Wolfe novel comes out I have to learn how to read him all over again.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 24 Apr 2003, 17:41 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Blattid:

Can you show me a fictive universe which maps exactly against the real?
If so, how can you know it does?

Matthew:

When a character in a Ruth Rendell thriller walks a London street near my home I can too. When Graves' Claudius refers to the Sybiline prophesies I can recall the cave complex of the Cumean Sybil I visited in February. Taking a plane or driving car are possible.

While character and narrative might in varying degrees be creations of the author their milieu is something we can experience.

It seems to me that you are saying here that persons (characters) and events (narrative) are not part of "the real," but places (streets and caves) and inanimate objects (planes and cars) are. Am I understanding you correctly in this?

But tracing Severian's walk through Nessus, buying a copy of A Lancre Witch's Cookbook direct from the Guild of Engravers, getting to work by transporter or taking a holiday on a GSV... these are somewhat out of reach.

Worlds with deliquescing doors and worlds with hinges ...

This reverts to the subject/object orientation of SF/MF. SF expends much of its discursive energy on the level of the object, creating and analyzing things that do not exist in the "consensus" world. MF need not do this and uses more of its discursive energy creating and analyzing the subjectivity of characters. But the subjects of attention and analysis in MF are no more (or less) "real" than the objects of attention and analysis in SF; though one could reasonably claim, I suppose, that they represent a kind of thing that exists in the consensus world, where deliquescing doors and transporters do not ...

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 24 Apr 2003, 17:45 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Me:

Can you show me a fictive universe which maps exactly against the real?
If so, how can you know it does?

Gareth (I reverse the order of your paragraphs to come to my point more quickly):

Clearly, you can never have a completely 'real' representation of a world in
a narrative (whether it be a fictional or non-fictional narrative for that matter) because it will always be a 'representation' of the thing, not the thing itself; but clearly some fictions are trying far harder to map onto the real world than others...

I suppose the word "exact" is what prompted my question. Obviously it does not mean that "everything" in the "real" (consensus) is rerepresented in the text; that would require an infinite text. Does it mean perhaps that everything described in the fictional text represents something that actually exists in the "real" world? And if so, just how exactly does it have to represent that something in order to be an "exact" mapping? I don't grok this.

But there are differing degrees of 'mapping', if you see what I mean. I highly 'realist' or 'naturalistic' narrative like an Old Norse saga is going
to map its fictive world far more closely to what it knows as the 'real' world than other narratives that have no interest in being at realistic or naturalistic...

Degrees of representation I have no problem with. It's this "exact" thing that gave me heartburn.

Craig Brewer — 24 Apr 2003, 18:03 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

I know this is a rather unphilosophical take on what is a fascinating issue, but it seems that the issue of "real" worlds in fiction is much more of a historically generic issue.

I'm thinking particularly of the rise of the novel and its separation from medieval romance. One of the large differences between romance and novel was the issue of story vs. allegory. Romance itself had always been caught between the two and in the 17th and 18th centuries, people would say that they were writing "novels" rather than "romances" in the medieval sense largely because of its associations with allegory. So even when you had early gothic novels like *The Castle of Otranto*, people would call it a novel rather than "supernatural romance" because it was more "real" than an allegory...even though it had ghosts and statues coming to life, etc.

My point, with that one example, is that fiction (which is already "false" to the extent that it's intentionally made up) may find its degree of reality not through correspondence to something "out there" but by the way it corresponds to traditions of writing that have their own assumptions about reality. That may help explain why Vonnegut and W. Burroughs can get away with saying that they don't do sf when their alternate worlds are often more removed from "everyday reality" than a lot of, say, Ellison's work (imho). They put (or are put) in a "literary" genre rather than "sf," both of which are genres with less than a century of history as individual genres themselves.

Craig

Craig Brewer — 24 Apr 2003, 18:15 · follows Craig Brewer

More musings: If you've never read it, I highly suggest Samuel R. Delany's "The Jewel Hinged Jaw." I don't know if it's still in print or not, but he has a fascinating discussion of what makes even a single sentence "science fictioned" rather than "mainstreamed." He has a wonderful reading of the single sentence "The red sun is high, the blue low" in which he explains how sf forces the reader to create his image of the world of the story, not necessarily from the ground up, by taking the stock of meanings and expectations we normally have and rearranging them in new and unexpected ways.

We could argue about whether such a method is distinct to sf (I doubt that it is), but it's always been a helpful discussion for me to think of sf as a rearrangement of expectations/meanings which, real or

not, I've just become used to. The idea that each word corrects my previous image has always been compelling. Delany puts it this way: "A 60,000 word novel is one picture corrected 59,999 times." A catchy phrase.

Chris — 24 Apr 2003, 18:32 · follows Craig Brewer

From Blattid's excellent, intelligent, and well-written post I pick out only the part I think I disagree with:

We get into a cateogry error when we use the concept of "reality" in discussing a fictional text -- that is, when we discuss any text at the level of fiction. The world of discourse is precisely *_not_* "real" -- though the text which embodies the discourse clearly is a "real" text. (But is the discourse, is any discourse, "real?" What does it mean to call a discourse "real?")

I would say that this is not to be taken for granted. Philosophically speaking the idea that the world is itself a type of text goes back quite a ways; if you're a postmodernist, it's almost inescapable. I wish I were at home to provide some examples, not because they're needed so much as that they're simply beautiful and eloquent. My favorite is from Mallarme, but you could as easily use an example from Wolfe himself: Horn, in IGJ (I think) has the insight while the Outsider is standing behind him that, to the outsider, **everything he called "real" was a kind of story**.

Of course, when Wolfe did that he's doing more than mentioning a philosophical or religious outlook, he's also throwing in a moebius-strip-of-a-plot-twist. I still have unresolved "issues" as far as that whole chapter goes, but that's nothing new.

In any event, what I'm getting at is that you have to be able to treat a textual object as "real" **within the bounds of the text**. When you're examining the text as it would look from the inside, it seems as proper to use the term "real" as it ever can be. Of course, there are other ways of looking at texts than this, which we use more often than not (and are generally not consciously aware of the transition) - these are more akin to metaphysics, and using the word "real" then becomes questionable.

One difference between fact and truth is that you can alter fact at will in creating discursive worlds, and remain in good faith with the text and the (hypothetical, hypostesized) reader; if you alter truth, you enter into a condition of bad faith with the reader, the text, or both.

Within the realm of the text, you can't alter facts without altering the truth. If you take this thread of conversation and apply it to Silkhorn, who is presented as being able to alter other people's stories **and his own**, you get a monstrosity of logic that makes me want to stick my head in the microwave. The root of the problem, near as I can tell, is that the relationship between reader and storyteller is unresolvable.

I probably put that fairly obtusely. But I guess a good leading question to ask is: in your opinion, if Silkhorn is in a condition of bad faith with his reader/text, does this mean that Wolfe is of necessity in a condition of bad faith with his? If you say that it does not then it implies that there are different layers of truth, not just fact, involved.

Another fun question, of course, is "how many texts is the Book of the Short Sun?" Akin to "How many Torahs are there?"

Too Much Coffee Chris

Mike Sakasegawa — 24 Apr 2003, 20:07 · follows Chris

Blattid wrote:

This reverts to the subject/object orientation of SF/MF. SF expends much of its discursive energy on the level of the object, creating and analyzing things that do not exist in the "consensus" world. MF need not do this and uses more of its discursive energy creating and analyzing the subjectivity of characters. But the subjects of attention and analysis in MF are no more (or less) "real" than the objects of attention and analysis in SF; though one could reasonably claim, I suppose, that they represent a kind of thing that exists in the consensus world, where deliquescing doors and transporters do not ...

You talked about how an SF reader tends to decode the language used in different ways from an MF reader, and here you talk about the focus of the writer's discursive energy. I'm still not sure I comp

I'm not an expert on genre criticism, especially in book form, but in film criticism, some critics define genres by the semantic and syntactic elements of the films which comprise it's body. The sema

A lot of "soft" SF is mainly focused on the subjective experience and emotional state of the characters. For example, most of the works of Orson Scott Card. True, he does spend some portion of each f MF and for "hard" SF, but I'm not sure that it includes "lighter" works into each genre that should be included.

Unfortunately, it seems that what constitutes a genre depends highly on who is asked, and should that be the case? To me, Vonnegut _has_ written SF, even if he doesn't think so, because he uses certa

On a completely unrelated note, I've decided on a Whorl-type name for myself. I picked the Japanese word for "Sheep," as that is the Japanese zodiac sign for the year in which I was born. Thus:

-Hitsuji

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 24 Apr 2003, 20:17 · follows Mike Sakasegawa

Side note to Craig: Yes, THE JEWEL-HINGED JAW is excellent, as is its successor, STARBOARD WINE.

Chris writes:

From Blattid's excellent, intelligent, and well-written post I pick out only the part I think I disagree with:

Goodness, how dare I argue after that flattery? 8*)

But I seem to be argumentative this week.

We get into a cateogry error when we use the concept of "reality" in discussing a fictional text -- that is, when we discuss any text at the level of fiction. The world of discourse is precisely _not_ "real" -- though the text which embodies the discourse clearly is a "real" text. (But is the discourse, is any discourse, "real?" What does it mean to call a discourse "real?")

I would say that this is not to be taken for granted. Philosophically speaking the idea that the world is itself a type of text goes back quite a ways; if you're a postmodernist, it's almost inescapable.

H'mmm ... I don't consider myself a postmodernist, though I am comfortable using some of the tools of the structuralists and poststructuralists for my own purposes. How shall I say: my episteme is not that of postmodernism, and _particularly_ in that I refuse to regard the world as constituted of text or discourse.

To consider it so is anthropocentric in the extreme; those who hold this view need to ask themselves what there was before there were animals capable of "thinking discourse," and if they answer that there was no "world" as such because "worlds" exist only with relation to a subject then I throw up my hands in despair of communicating with such persons, because they've disappeared up their own, uh, idiosyncratic use of standard vocabulary.

Perhaps some postmodernists do indeed live in worlds constituted from discourse and text. If so, I pity those persons. I live in one constituted of things like rocks, air, wine, bread, pain and joy, which also (to my ongoing pleasure) contains many interesting texts.

The other option is to suppose that the world is a text (textus, web) constituted of all these things as signifiers; but I'll just go all Kantian on you then and insist that a rock exists in- and for-itself prior (both logically prior and chronologically prior) to any existence it may have for-us as a signifier -- that its existence-for-us-as-signifier is always already supplementary to its existence-as-such.

I wish I were at home to provide some examples, not because they're needed so much as that they're simply beautiful and eloquent. My favorite is from Mallarme, but you could as easily use an example from Wolfe himself: Horn, in IGJ (I think) has the insight while the Outsider is standing behind him that, to the outsider, *everything he called "real" was a kind of story*.

And... That we can perceive "everything" as a story speaks to our way of perceiving -- is pure subject -- not to the objects we perceive. The danger (to me) of this way of thinking and speaking is that it threatens to confuse our perceptions with the things we perceive; BUT, a perception is always a signifier, and the word is not the thing, the map is not the territory. Horn is operating here at a very high level of abstraction.

In fact I also do conceive the world as a "story," told from the point of view of the Increate. But that's at a level where we are all absolutely objects as over against the Increate, Who is pure subject.

[...]

In any event, what I'm getting at is that you have to be able to treat a textual object as "real" *within the bounds of the text*. When you're examining the text as it would look from the inside, it seems as proper to use the term "real" as it ever can be. Of course, there are other ways of looking at texts than this, which we use more often than not (and are generally not consciously aware of the transition) - these are more akin to metaphysics, and using the word "real" then becomes questionable.

I suppose my problem is that I don't exist "within the bounds of the text," I always am looking at the "within" of the text from outside.

One difference between fact and truth is that you can alter fact at will in creating discursive worlds, and remain in good faith with the text and the (hypothetical, hypostesized) reader; if you alter truth, you enter into a condition of bad faith with the reader, the

text, or both.

Within the realm of the text, you can't alter facts without altering the truth.

Well, I'm not sure how that plays out, but that wasn't what I was talking about to begin with; I was saying that, in creating a fictive world for a text, the creator can make it false-to-fact with respect to the consensual world and still be in good faith, but if she falsifies "truth" as I described it, she will be in bad faith. And this is a matter of degree -- obviously if she changes the facts about how hot boiling water is, or the sensitivity of human skin to heat, she can change the very minor "truth" about it scalding you. If she messes with more major truths, she will wind up in bad faith.

In other words, the fiction needs to remain "true to" the writer's experienced truth, even if the events she writes about are not events that she or anyone else has ever experienced. A failure of this is a failure of faith.

If you take this thread of conversation and apply it to Silkhorn, who is presented as being able to alter other people's stories *and his own*, you get a monstrosity of logic that makes me want to stick my head in the microwave. The root of the problem, near as I can tell, is that the relationship between reader and storyteller is unresolvable.

Well, I suppose it is in some ways. The story doesn't exist until someone reads it -- all that exists is marks on paper (or pixels, or whatever). So the reader is always in a sense the creator of what she reads.

I probably put that fairly obtusely. But I guess a good leading question to ask is: in your opinion, if Silkhorn is in a condition of bad faith with his reader/text, does this mean that Wolfe is of necessity in a condition of bad faith with his? If you say that it does not then it implies that there are different layers of truth, not just fact, involved.

H'mmmm. Okay, let's say that the Narr is in bad faith, because he suppresses or falsifies some facts and/or truths. Wolfe, though he writes exactly the same words the Narr writes is nonetheless not telling the same story that the Narr is telling; Wolfe is telling the story of the Narr telling that story. For him to directly reveal what the Narr conceals would itself be a falsification of the story Wolfe is telling.

Then for Wolfe to write in good faith with his readers directly involves the Narr being in bad faith with his; if Wolfe does not accurately (truthfully) present the Narr's bad faith, then Wolfe acts in bad faith. However, the Narr does not act in bad faith with us, because we do not read his narrative; we read Wolfe's.

Does anyone's head hurt yet?

The point here is that the truths the Narrator seeks to tell or suppress or falsify are not the truths that Wolfe seeks to tell (leave it at that, because I am assuming Wolfe to act in good faith), because the truths Wolfe seeks to tell are precisely about the Narr's telling, suppressing, and falsifying.

One can call this "different layers of truth." But it seems to me that Wolfe has to deal with the Narr's truths as well as his own, which creates an asymmetric relation in that the Narr doesn't have to deal with Wolfe's. Further, Wolfe has to deal with the Narr's truths as honestly as he does with his own, in order to accurately tell about the Narr's suppressing and falsifying them.

I conclude then that there is only one level of truth in the textual world, in that the Narr is not

aware of the Lupine layer.

I conclude also that, though there are (at least) two layers of truth in the consensual world, Wolfe must treat both layers with integrity in order to remain in good faith with the text and the reader.

Another fun question, of course, is "how many texts is the Book of the Short Sun?" Akin to "How many Torahs are there?"

Or, "Is Pierre Menard's DON QUIXOTE a different text from Cervantes'?"

Or, "Is Chris's SHORT SUN different from Blattid's?"

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 24 Apr 2003, 20:19 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Hitsuji,

This looks like an interesting post. Alas, the lines are truncated sufficiently to make it unreadable. I believe this is a "feature" of the list reflector. Can you repost with carriage returns breaking the lines?

From: Mike Sakasegawa <john.saxon at verizon.net>
Reply-To: urth at urth.net
To: <urth at urth.net>
Subject: Re: (urth) Generic Considerations
Date: Thu, 24 Apr 2003 13:07:43 -0700

Blattid wrote:

This reverts to the subect/object orientation of SF/MF. SF expends much of it discursive energy on the level of the object, creating and analyzing things that do not exist in the "consensus" world. MF need not do this and uses more of its discursive energy creating and analyzing the subjectivity of characters. But the subjects of attention and analysis in MF are no more (or less) "real" than the objects of attention and analysis in SF; though one could reasonably claim, I suppose, that they represent a kind of thing that exists in the consensus world, where deliquescing doors and transporters do not ...

You talked about how an SF reader tends to decode the language used in different ways from an MF reader, and here you talk about the focus of the writer's discursive energy. I'm still not sure I comp

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Unfortunately, it seems that what constitutes a genre depends highly on who is asked, and should that be the case? To me, Vonnegut _has_ written SF, even if he doesn't think so, because he uses certa

On a completely unrelated note, I've decided on a Whorl-type name for myself. I picked the Japanese word for "Sheep," as that is the Japanese

zodiac sign for the year in which I was born. Thus:

-Hitsuji

--

Mike Sakasegawa — 24 Apr 2003, 21:05 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Blattid wrote:

This looks like an interesting post. Alas, the lines are truncated sufficiently to make it unreadable. I believe this is a "feature" of the list reflector. Can you repost with carriage returns breaking the lines?

Many apologies! I'm still getting used to the quirks of this place.

Unfortunately, I didn't save a local copy, but here is an attempt:

Previously, Blattid wrote:

This reverts to the subject/object orientation of SF/MF. SF expends much of its discursive energy on the level of the object, creating and analyzing things that do not exist in the "consensus" world. MF need not do this and uses more of its discursive energy creating and analyzing the subjectivity of characters. But the subjects of attention and analysis in MF are no more (or less) "real" than the objects of attention and analysis in SF; though one could reasonably claim, I suppose, that they represent a kind of thing that exists in the consensus world, where deliquescing doors and transporters do not ...

You talked about how an SF reader tends to decode the language used in different ways from an MF reader, and here you talk about the focus of the writer's discursive energy. I'm still not sure I completely agree with your characterization of SF.

I'm not an expert on genre criticism, especially in book form, but in film criticism, some critics define genres by the semantic and syntactic elements of the films which comprise its body. The semantic elements are the individual story items whereas the syntactic elements are the structure and themes of the story. To use Westerns as an example, some semantic elements are the Western landscape, cowboy hats, six-shooters and horses. Some syntactic elements are the struggle between law and chaos and the journey of a solitary hero. It's important to note, of course, that not every work representative of the genre will include all of the elements, merely that they will draw from the pool of elements typical to the genre.

A lot of "soft" SF is mainly focused on the subjective experience and emotional state of the characters. For example, most of the works of Orson Scott Card. True, he does spend some portion of each story explaining the SFnal semantic elements it includes, but the vast majority of the text is concerned with the subjective experience of the characters and the ways in which their situations affect them. How different, then, is an SF writer like Card from, say, John Irving? Card spends a certain amount of energy explaining the futuristic technologies and exotic settings in his stories, but no more so than Irving spends discussing the history of certain small New England towns in his. But that exposition is not the point or main thrust of either narrative, rather, it is merely the setting or external actions that influence the characters. Both writers are far more concerned with the actions and emotions of the characters than anything else. Syntactically, "soft" SF has a lot in common with a lot of the more plot-driven MF out there. I think that your characterization seems very appropriate for the more "high-brow" parts of MF

and for "hard" SF, but I'm not sure that it includes "lighter" works into each genre that should be included.

Unfortunately, it seems that what constitutes a genre depends highly on who is asked, and should that be the case? To me, Vonnegut _has_ written SF, even if he doesn't think so, because he uses certain semantic elements that are a part of the SF genre. Marketing differences and the disdain of certain critics for genre fiction should not be the defining characteristics of the genre. Thus I consider people like Vonnegut and Crichton to be SF writers.

-Hitsuji

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 25 Apr 2003, 00:03 · follows Mike Sakasegawa

Me:

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Hitsuji:

You talked about how an SF reader tends to decode the language used in different ways from an MF reader, and here you talk about the focus of the writer's discursive energy. I'm still not sure I completely agree with your characterization of SF.

A fussy point: Actually, I didn't say anything about the "writer's" discursive energy. If you recall, I put some emphasis on the expectations a reader brings to a text based on genre. The energy of the discourse is provided, not by the writer, nor by the text, but by the reader. As I said: The story doesn't exist unless someone reads it. A writer's skill is to produce a text with which a skilled reader can interact to produce an interesting-to-the-reader discourse. This means that the text provides direction to the reader's energy.

One example of this skill is efficiency: a writer who says something thing in fewer and less complex words will generally provide more pleasure to more readers than a writer who says "the same thing" in more and more complex words -- a wellknown principle, best and most often summed up in Strunk's Rule Seventeen ("Omit needless words"). This is a simple economic rule, which works as it does because the reader expends a certain amount of energy decoding each word and fitting it into the textus/web/discourse of the read text; more words, and more difficult words, mean more energy expended.

This doesn't mean that a complex or ornate style is necessarily bad, but that there has to be a commensurate payoff for it - if the complexity doesn't add some pleasure to the discourse, the reader gets less for her investment of time and energy. (Note that style can itself be a source of pleasure for some readers, but in today's world, where most readers are harrassed workers [including middle- class workers], rather than the leisure class, relatively few readers ever learn to enjoy the pleasure of style as such -- which is, among other things, one reason why modern poetry and the "average" reader have become more and more alienated from each other. It is also why Gene Wolfe wins the occasional Nebula and WFA but no Hugoes. His fiction is too much _work_ for a significant fraction of the SF readership.)

I'm not an expert on genre criticism, especially in book form, but in film criticism, some critics define genres by the semantic and syntactic elements of the films which comprise it's body. The semantic elements are the individual story items whereas the syntactic elements are the structure and themes of the story. To use Westerns as an example, some semantic elements are the Western landscape, cowboy hats, six-shooters and horses. Some syntactic elements are the struggle between law and chaos and the journey of a solitary hero. It's important to note, of course, that not every work representative of the genre will include all of the elements, merely that they will draw from the pool of elements typical to the genre.

This is rather different from the linguistic conception of semantics and syntax. I think it would take a while for me to wrap my head around it.

(On the other hand, they come close to what I would think of as paradigmatic and syntagmatic...)

At any rate, you're describing a labeling of genres by manifest content. This is possible but problematic. But then, every attempt to define genre, that I know of, turns out to be problematic; which is why I suggested, early in this conversation, that a genre (and particularly SF) is best described as a fuzzily-bounded group of texts produced by a fuzzily-bounded set of writers, working in awareness of each other so as to produce a metatextual tradition and dialog.

Two simple and fairly well-known examples of such dialog:

- o THE BOOK OF THE NEW SUN is clearly written as part of a dialog that also features Jack Vance's "Dying Earth" stories.
- o Joe Haldeman's THE FOREVER WAR is an explicit and radical reply to Heinlein's STARSHIP TROOPERS.

This is not to say that SF speaks only to other SF. It speaks to SF readers, and it speaks to the "real" (consensual) world.

A lot of "soft" SF is mainly focused on the subjective experience and emotional state of the characters. For example, most of the works of Orson Scott Card. True, he does spend some portion of each story explaining the SFnal semantic elements it includes, but the vast majority of the text is concerned with the subjective experience of the characters and the ways in which their situations affect them. How different, then, is an SF writer like Card from, say, John Irving?

I would say, radically different. Taking a "best-known" work of each of them:

ENDER'S GAME is a war story. (As such, it's also in dialog with -- fairly explicitly -- STARSHIP TROOPERS, but that's a side point.) It does, yes, deal with the subjective experience of Andrew Wiggen. But the focus of the text is not on Ender's subjective states, but on the objective occurrences in his world. In fact, the principal irony of the story -- and I do hope everyone's read it, because I'm blowing off the ending for anyone who hasn't -- is that his subjective experience is falsified. He is led to believe that he's playing war games, practicing, but in objective fact, he's delivering a fatal blow to an entire alien race. ENDER'S GAME -- like much "soft" SF -- deals with the play of the subjective and the objective.

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO GARP is an absurdist mock biography. I think of Irving as an existential humorist. A number of Bad Things happen to Garp and those around him in the

course of the story, but the focus of the book is on what they mean to him and what they make him -- it's kind of a bildungsroman in that sense -- and how, in the end, it don't mean sheeyit. The objective events in the story have an odd, almost mechanistic, feeling of fatalism: you can trace a line of cause and effect, but it has nothing to do with desert. Shit just happens.

Card spends a certain amount of energy explaining the futuristic technologies and exotic settings in his stories, but no more so than Irving spends discussing the history of certain small New England towns in his. But that exposition is not the point or main thrust of either narrative, rather, it is merely the setting or external actions that influence the characters. Both writers are far more concerned with the actions and emotions of the characters than anything else.

This implies a misunderstanding of what I mean by subject-orientation and object-orientation.

Irving uses objective events to trigger and validate Garp's subjective reactions and realizations that are the principal focus of his story, what he analyzes.

Card uses Ender's subjective reactions and realizations to valorize and intensify the objective events that are the focus of his story, what he analyzes.

(Ender's emotions serve, in part, to present Card's analysis of the objective events. Irving doesn't use Garp's emotions this way.)

Syntactically, "soft" SF has a lot in common with a lot of the more plot-driven MF out there. I think that your characterization seems very appropriate for the more "high-brow" parts of MF and for "hard" SF, but I'm not sure that it includes "lighter" works into each genre that should be included.

Perhaps I've given the impression that I'm considering this as a binaristic opposition. I don't mean it that way. The discourse of most (all?) fiction plays back and forth between the object and the subject. Sometimes the subject is emphasized to the point where the object becomes insignificant, as in Kafka; sometimes the object is emphasized similarly, as in Clarke.

In MF, and especially of the "literary" variety, the focus and analysis tend to privilege the subject; in SF, and especially hard SF, they tend to privilege the object. The rhetoric of each has developed accordingly.

One could draw a sort of spectrum. Taking some of the writers who've been mentioned in this discussion as data points:

PRIVILEGED OBJECT

Clarke
Asimov
Card
Clancy
Wolfe
Crichton
Irving
Proust
(Nabokov?)
Vonnegut
Kafka

PRIVILEGED SUBJECT

Unfortunately, it seems that what constitutes a genre depends highly on who is asked, and should that be the case?

Again, very much so - in my first or second post in this thread, I pointed out that "genre" means very different things to a reader, a critic, a publisher, and a bookseller.

To me, Vonnegut _has_ written SF, even if he doesn't think so, because he uses certain semantic elements that are a part of the SF genre.

He published some of his early work in SF magazines. That's the other thing I keep trying to emphasize: a genre isn't noun or pigeonhole; it's an adjective, and can be combined with other adjectival genres to describe the same text. Nora Roberts, as J.D. Robb, writes a series of novels that fit any reasonable reader's generic expectations for at least four genres: "Hot romance," "Social SF," "Suspense thriller," "Police-procedural mystery."

We have this particular prejudice, where we want to place SF in a binaristic opposition with MF. I don't think it quite works that way. (ARROWSMITH, anyone? MAROONED? THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN?)

Marketing differences and the disdain of certain critics for genre fiction should not be the defining characteristics of the genre. Thus I consider people like Vonnegut and Crichton to be SF writers.

I consider them writers. I consider some of their texts to be describable as SF -- not all. (MOTHER NIGHT, possibly Vonnegut's finest novel, has absolutely no element that anyone could plausibly label SFnal; ditto for GOD BLESS YOU, MISTER ROSEWATER and a number of short stories. Crichton has written several such books also.)

Mike Sakasegawa — 25 Apr 2003, 01:14 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Blattid:

A fussy point: Actually, I didn't say anything about the "writer's" discursive energy. If you recall, I put some emphasis on the expectations a reader brings to a text based on genre. The energy of the discourse is provided, not by the writer, nor by the text, but by the reader. As I said: The story doesn't exist unless someone reads it. A writer's skill is to produce a text with which a skilled reader can interact to produce an interesting-to-the-reader discourse. This means that the text provides direction to the reader's energy.

Ah, I misunderstood. In this case, then, isn't it kind of difficult to define a body of literature by the experience of the reader? After all, each reader will have a different experience of each work, many differing quite wildly from each other. Still, I suppose it could be argued that there will be enough similarities between the experiences of many readers that such a definition will be possible.

At any rate, you're describing a labeling of genres by manifest content. This is possible but problematic. But then, every attempt to define genre, that I know of, turns out to be problematic;

I agree.

which is why I suggested, early in this conversation, that a genre (and particularly SF) is best described as a fuzzily-bounded group of texts produced by a fuzzily-bounded set of writers, working in awareness of each other so as to produce a metatextual tradition

and dialog.

This is a quibble, but need they be aware of each other? Mostly likely, most, if not all, modern SF writers are aware of each other and the various historical figures in the genre, but what about those writers who began the tradition?

As I said, just a quibble.

This implies a misunderstanding of what I mean by subject-orientation and object-orientation.

Irving uses objective events to trigger and validate Garp's subjective reactions and realizations that are the principal focus of his story, what he analyzes.

Card uses Ender's subjective reactions and realizations to valorize and intensify the objective events that are the focus of his story, what he analyzes.

(Ender's emotions serve, in part, to present Card's analysis of the objective events. Irving doesn't use Garp's emotions this way.)

I think we have come away from "Ender's Game" with different interpretations. I understood the story to be primarily concerned with, not the war and the Battle School themselves, but the ways in which they affected the people involved, Ender in particular. In fact, in a writing article of his, Card pretty much says the same thing. The war with the Buggers is important to Ender, but not as much to us. Rather, it is the moral, motivational and emotional consequences that these events have for the characters that is most important.

Of course, as you pointed out, the energy for the discourse is provided by the reader. Each reader will approach the text with a different set of assumptions. Thus, your reading of "Ender's Game" is every bit as valid as mine or Card's.

Perhaps I've given the impression that I'm considering this as a binaristic opposition. I don't mean it that way. The discourse of most (all?) fiction plays back and forth between the object and the subject. Sometimes the subject is emphasized to the point where the object becomes insignificant, as in Kafka; sometimes the object is emphasized similarly, as in Clarke.

Good point. The problem with hard, and especially with binary, definitions is that there are no rules for literature. A better approach might be using a statistical analogy. For any set there will be items that deviate from the mean, but there are still identifiable trends.

In MF, and especially of the "literary" variety, the focus and analysis tend to privilege the subject; in SF, and especially hard SF, they tend to privilege the object. The rhetoric of each has developed accordingly.

One could draw a sort of spectrum. Taking some of the writers who've been mentioned in this discussion as data points:

PRIVILEGED OBJECT

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Asimov
Card
Clancy
Wolfe

Crichton
Irving
Proust
(Nabokov?)
Vonnegut
Kafka

PRIVILEGED SUBJECT

I like your idea of a spectrum, but your placement of the authors points out a big difference in the way the two of us perceive them. This may be due to a lack of understanding on my part. It seems to me that, in general, what you've described as object- oriented stories tend to be those that concentrate on either the plot or idea (that is, ideas that don't relate to things like emotion, morals, etc), while subject-oriented stories tend to focus on the experience of one of more characters.

Crichton, then, seems to have a lot more in common with Clarke than with Irving. Whether it's "Jurassic Park" or "Congo" or "Eaters of the Dead," the focus is on the events of the story. The characters, while believable, are really important only insofar as they advance the plot. "Jurassic Park" isn't really about how Grant feels, it's about the idea of a dinosaur theme park. We don't spend very much time in his head, and he doesn't tend to think much about things other than what's going on. Contrast this with "Ender's Game," in which the title character spends an incredible amount of time on introspection.

I just don't feel that object-oriented vs. subject-oriented is enough to distinguish SF. Even leaving out what you call MF, what about fantasy? We would never confuse Tolkien with Benford, and yet both are much more concerned with the worlds and concepts they portray than with individual characters.

I agree that defining genres by content can be problematic, but I think it is easier to do so. In fact, I'd argue that most readers probably do so as well. A person who is looking for a story with lasers and black holes reaches for an SF novel. Someone who wants thrusting loins and heaving breasts goes for the romance novel. These differences have just as much to do with the reader's expectations and seem easier to sort out.

Of course, it might be even better to try incorporating both ideas into a larger whole. Especially since I find your ideas much more erudite than my own.

Jason Ingram — 25 Apr 2003, 02:58 · follows Mike Sakasegawa

I don't recognize many of my opinions in the arguments against which Blattid responds. Perhaps that's because I was unclear and hasty in my earlier posts. Rather than exacerbating the risk of seriously misunderstanding each other's positions, I'll try to present a general response.

We're using ambiguous terms (reality, truth, fact) to distinguish other ambiguous terms (fiction, ?,). I like ambiguity, and don't particularly want to draw clear delineations between fact and reality. Blattid's distinctions make sense--but there's also some slippage. Delirium, for instance, is a fact that expresses truths but is also a fiction that expresses falsehoods: delirious visions are subjectively real, and are factual occurrences, but their contents are fictitious and non-factual.

Empirical verifiability is nice, and can challenge common sense (e.g. dropping an apple and a ball of iron to see which falls faster). Fetishizing empirical verifiability is, to be simplistic, bad.

So far I don't think Blattid would disagree. Fact, truth, reality . . . ok; whichever is fine with me.

I'm comfortable remaining silent about that which we cannot speak.

To extend the Wittgensteinian trope, Wolfe's characters present a variety of language-games that challenge defenders of a continuum of objectivity. That is, the indeterminacy of the gaps in Latro's narratives aspire to different ideal of objectivity (this terminology is an arbitrary imposition) than the objectivity at issue with Horn or the text of 5HC. Objectivity could mean, to use what I interpret to be Blattid's terminology, "truthfulness" for some, "factualness" for others, and "realness" for a third group. Each should aspire to attain their ideals of objectivity, but each will be playing a different language-game with different standards.

Three specific replies:

[Blattid]:

Since all reporters are, willy-nilly, biassed, I prefer a reporter who is open about her bias.

yes, I agree, and I think this is perfectly consistent with my earlier viewpoint. Apologies if I was misleading in my exposition.

[Blattid]:

Unless one were to create a language with an infinite vocabulary, it's not merely a straw-dog but a chimera. I have little truck with positivism, but that doesn't mean we need to throw objectivity out the window.

The problems with positivism are even more serious than that; see the above on objectivity.

[Blattid]:

I guess the question I want to ask of this view is, what was there before language existed to construct "reality" from?

Flippant answer: Severian

Serious answer: Silence

Academic answer: It's hard to talk about the non-discursive. I think there are problems with Kantian approaches to reality (there is a really real real out there, but we can't know anything for certain about it; we can only know about the conditions of possibility of knowledge and sense-perception), but don't want to get into that discussion. It's not so much *language* as *subjects* that construct realities. This doesn't mean that anything and everything is up for grabs; there are always constraints. However, absent foundationalist arguments, it's hard to specify what those constraints are. Solution: Experimentation to test limits?

Cordially,

Sepia

matthew.malthouse — 25 Apr 2003, 08:47 · follows Jason Ingram

On 24/04/2003 18:41:20 Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:
Blattid:

Can you show me a fictive universe which maps exactly against the real?

If so, how can you know it does?

Matthew:

When a character in a Ruth Rendell thriller walks a London street near my home I can too. When Graves' Claudius refers to the Sybiline prophesies I can recall the cave complex of the Cumean Sybil I visited in February. Taking a plane or driving car are possible.

While character and narrative might in varying degrees be creations of the author their milieu is something we can experience.

It seems to me that you are saying here that persons (characters) and events (narrative) are not part of "the real," but places (streets and caves) and inanimate objects (planes and cars) are. Am I understanding you correctly in this?

Substitute observable, or perhaps experiential, for "real".

Matthew

Phoebe Davis — 25 Apr 2003, 15:42 · follows matthew.malthouse

This has been a fantastic line of posts. Thanks to one and all.

I would like to add this: to the best of my knowledge Kurt Vonnegut publically stated that he did write science fiction. My memory is that it was 10 or more years ago while he was speaking at an American Booksellers Association meeting. He something akin to: Of course I write science fiction, I've always written science fiction. But if I'd let anyone call it science fiction when I started to write, no one would have reviewed my books, bought my books, or reviewed my books.

I would like this to be true on several levels and for several reasons - most importantly I thought it a positive sign that the 60's ghetto walls were finally down, and that this guy was finally coming clean after so many years. It obviously could only have happened several years after his urinal quote from Wampeters. I'll see if I can track down the reference. Perhaps its only a rumor or my faulty memory? I wondered if anyone else had heard this?

Phoebe

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 25 Apr 2003, 16:13 · follows Phoebe Davis

All:

I have to back off from this discussion for now. It's been taking up a huge amount of my time, and, as my work is getting into project-crunch mode, I need that time for now.

My apologies to anyone to whom I "owe" a response. Acknowledging that there is no real _obligation_ there, I still feel that it's rude to just cut off like this, and that an explanation and an apology are in order.

Gareth Jelley — 25 Apr 2003, 19:57 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

From: "Jason Ingram" <j_ingram at mac.com>

Academic answer: It's hard to talk about the non-discursive. I think there are problems with Kantian approaches to reality (there is a really real real out there, but we can't know anything for certain about it; we can only know about the conditions of possibility of knowledge and sense-perception), but don't want to get into that discussion. It's not so much *language* as *subjects* that construct realities. This doesn't mean that anything and everything is up for grabs; there are always constraints. However, absent foundationalist arguments, it's hard to specify what those constraints are. Solution: Experimentation to test limits?

A very interesting post, and if anyone else is often perplexed by your Kants, your Kierkgaards, and your Wittgensteins I recommend the brilliant 'Very Short Introductions' series of books from the Oxford University Press - they are all about 120-140pp, and they cover a huge range of subjects (there is one on 'Post-Structualism' and another on 'Quantum Theory', to give to recent examples...)

Me chipping in again :o)

Best,

Gareth.

Gareth Jelley — 25 Apr 2003, 20:16 · follows Gareth Jelley

From: "Gareth Jelley" <gjelley at btopenworld.com>

A very interesting post, and if anyone else is often perplexed by your Kants, your Kierkgaards...

Or Kierk*e*gaard :o)

Anon,

G.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 25 Apr 2003, 21:39 · follows Gareth Jelley

Gareth writes:

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Also good are the "...for Beginners" series from Writers and Artists. Their "Kierkegaard for Beginners" that gave me entree to a thinker whose prose I had previously found opaque and murky. They're somewhere between books and info-comics: heavily (and humorously) illustrated, and run about the same length as the OUP books Gareth mentions -- heck, since I've never seen those, they may for all I know be British editions of the same series.

Thomas Bitterman — 26 Apr 2003, 01:08 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

H'mmm. At this point I have to ask the questions I've been unasking throughout this discussion. I don't like these questions, I suspect

them of being inherently unanswerable. But:

Correspondence with ... what?

And what does "correspond" mean in this context?

Unless and until someone answers those questions, which I don't see anyone doing real soon, any "correspondence with reality test" seems to me not only misleading, but meaningless.

All of which is ... I think ... very relevant indeed to Wolfe and his "unreliable narrators."

I've always seen Wolfe's work as an impassioned fight against this line of thought. Wolfe likes puzzles, and tosses them all over.

The problem with theories that "the reader brings their own meaning to the text", "the meaning of the text is socially constructed", and other vaguely postmodern-type-stuff is that it would be impossible to have puzzles if books were like that.

Consider the puzzle posed in *_Lexicon Urthus_*: "Who (or what) is the intelligence in the depths of the mine at Saltus?". Many hours have been spent poring over the text and thinking about what it could be. If the meaning of the text were socially constructed it wouldn't be such a big deal - any answer you could get people to agree on would be fine. I hereby start the group that believes it to be a giant potato. It's favorite song is "The Eyes of Texas are Upon You" and it plans to cover the world in JuJuBees.

That's a stupid theory. I know it, you know it, and Wolfe knows it. That's the point. Wolfe puts puzzles in to show that *_the meaning is in the text_*. He believes very strongly in the truth of a text. The Truth. The Text. If the truth-value of every text is radically indeterminate, why believe?

--Blattid

Tom

Tami Whitehead — 26 Apr 2003, 16:01 · follows Thomas Bitterman

That's the point. Wolfe puts puzzles in to show that *_the meaning is in the text_*. He believes very strongly in the truth of a text. The Truth. The Text. If the truth-value of every text is radically indeterminate, why believe?

>--Blattid

I rarely poke my head out, but have to agree with Blattid, that Wolfe does indeed use puzzles and other 'tricks' to illustrate this deeply held conviction of the Truth of the Text.

In the discussion of other authors, I didn't see Robert Graves addressed, but his viewpoint was similar, and to an extent broader, in that it included Truth in Texts not only of his novels and poetry, but

how he read other works, particularly those dealing with ancient history or classical mythology. His take on myth and history was contested largely by those who take the 'social construction' theory--what the group agrees upon as the interpretation is more valid than what the writer was intending to convey, or worse, that what the writer was trying to convey is meaningless until and unless we as a society give it meaning, or worth. Any interpretation is suspect until ratified by a formless, shifting gerrymander type group. Bleh!

Particularly in the Soldier books, Graves' influence on Wolfe's work is 'in your face.' Arcane practices are given a practical interpretation, names and words are misused in the way they were misused *at the time* illustrating just how misconceptions arose, and outright manipulation of the facts and propaganda machines of the Spartans and Persians take care of the rest. Wolfe clearly has seen past the 'psychological manifest' of the contemporary interpretation of myth and history, making it not the dry study of Xenophon and his horsemanship, nor a couch trip of social psycho-analysis, but a living and breathing Life that was Lived by Real People, complete with gods and goddesses and wights and all manner of beasties that, not as a type of zeitgeist, but as real entities with their own agendas, lived in the world with men.

So. An exercise in critical thought? A longing for the return of impassioned scholarship? I have no way of knowing why Wolfe feels this strongly and demonstrates this feeling in his works, but there it is. And I am tickled to death that he does so, that his worlds are complete and intact and completely open to us, if we only look. Bless his pea-pickin' heart.

razorkittee

Alice K. Turner — 27 Apr 2003, 13:47 · follows Tami Whitehead

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That's the point. Wolfe puts puzzles in to show that _the meaning is in the text_. He believes very strongly in the truth of a text.

The Truth. The Text. If the truth-value of every text is radically indeterminate, why believe?

>--Blattid

I rarely poke my head out, but have to agree with Blatid, that Wolfe does indeed use puzzles and other 'tricks' to illustrate this deeply held conviction of the Truth of the Text.

In the discussion of other authors, I didn't see Robert Graves addressed, but his viewpoint was similar, and to an extent broader, in that it included Truth in Texts not only of his novels and poetry, but how he read other works, particularly those dealing with ancient history or classical mythology. His take on myth and history was contested largely by those who take the 'social construction' theory--what the group agrees upon as the interpretation is more valid than what the writer was intending to convey, or worse, that what the writer was trying to convey is meaningless until and unless we as a society give it meaning, or worth. Any interpretation is suspect until ratified by a formless, shifting gerrymander type group. Bleh!

Particularly in the Soldier books, Graves' influence on Wolfe's work is 'in your face.' Arcane practices are given a practical interpretation, names and words are misused in the way they were misused *at the time* illustrating just how misconceptions arose, and outright manipulation of the facts and propaganda machines of the Spartans and Persians take care of the rest. Wolfe clearly has seen past the 'psychological manifest' of the contemporary interpretation of myth and history, making it not the dry study of Xenophon and his horsemanship, nor a couch trip of social psycho-analysis, but a living and breathing Life that was Lived by Real People, complete with gods and goddesses and wights and all manner of beasties that, not as a type of zeitgeist, but as real entities with their own agendas, lived in the world with men.

So. An exercise in critical thought? A longing for the return of impassioned scholarship? I have no way of knowing why Wolfe feels this strongly and demonstrates this feeling in his works, but there it is. And I am tickled to death that he does so, that his worlds are complete and intact and completely open to us, if we only look. Bless his pea-pickin' heart.

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This is from the FAQ of alt.mythology. I wrote it. Don't subscribe to alt.mythology; it has been hijacked by thugs. I could not be sorrier to say so; it was once an enchanting newsgroup.

-alga

Robert Graves (1895 - 1985) Graves, a considerable poet, essayist and novelist, wrote two books that have had a great influence on the modern study of mythology. The first is The Greek Myths, published sometimes in two volumes, also, more usefully, in one. This is probably the handiest reference guide to any mythology ever compiled.* (It is not the one to get if you just "want the story.") Graves, also a learned classicist, in effect invented a form of hypertext for the

printed page many decades before html was ever dreamed of. The brief chapters are first divided into alphabetized paragraphs which tell all or part of a myth (subsequent chapters continue it). Each paragraph is end-noted to its source(s) from Greece or Rome (Roman authors are sourced, but only Greek mythology is considered). Following that, brief numbered paragraphs give Graves's explanations and interpretations of the text. At the end of the book is an index of names, giving pronunciation, translation of meaning (when applicable) and all citations. Hebrew Myths, written with Raphael Patai, uses the same wonderfully flexible format, but can't be said to be so influential, possibly because the Bible, for many people, is inadmissible as mythology. Graves's other big book, *The White Goddess*, may be the most eccentric non-fictional work ever written by a classicist. Its influence on the popular perception of mythology, both Greek and Northern European, has been enormous, not necessarily a good thing, but certainly an interesting one. The book has been hard-wired into 20th-century cultural history despite being almost entirely romantic (or poetic) personal theory. Its theories underwrite modern neo-paganism, and, even more, have promoted or anointed the concept of the Triple Goddess to a point past common sense--and scholarly protest. Otherwise hardheaded people, with a nose for hokum, can love *The White Goddess*--its charms are many--without necessarily embracing it, or is that her? Beware, she's dangerous.

A number of Graves's novels may be of interest to alt.mythology readers: *Hercules*, *My Shipmate*; *Homer's Daughter*; *King Jesus*; his translation of Apuleius's Latin novel *The Golden Ass*; and the two non-mythological novels about the Emperor Claudius that are the basis for TV's great mini-series, *"I, Claudius."*

* If you know how to read it, that is. It is important, but easy, to learn how to read Graves as a solid reference tool. Take all the alphabetized material, the footnotes and the index as gospel -- he's completely reliable there. Take the numbered material (the interpretations) with a great big pinch of salt (remembering, however, that he was a learned, cultured and well-traveled man, also that he respected the reader enough to keep his opinions separate from the facts). Keep in mind that the poetic mind does not work quite as other minds do. If you doubt that, read *The White Goddess*.