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Introduction to the special issue on science fiction

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Abstract
This introduction to a special issue of *Thesis Eleven* devoted to science fiction begins by exploring the way the genre has been handled by German and French critical theory and their Anglophone equivalents. It proceeds to a discussion of the historical sociology of the genre and, thence, to an account of what it terms the dialectic of science fiction endangerment. Finally, it concludes with a brief overview of the various contributions to the issue.

Keywords
Apocalypse, critical theory, dystopia, ethics, historical sociology, science fiction, time travel

Critical theory and science fiction

A special issue on science fiction of a journal devoted to 'critical theory and historical sociology' might well seem an inherently improbable proposition. The vehement hostility with which Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer dismissed the Hollywood 'culture industries' is, of course, legendary (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 120–31). And science fiction (henceforth SF) is today indisputably a prime product of precisely those self-same culture industries: James Cameron's 2009 *Avatar* was the second highest grossing Hollywood movie ever, revenue adjusted for inflation, George Lucas's 1977

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Star Wars the third (Wikipedia, 2015). Even Ernst Bloch, the most utopian of German critical theorists, dismissed this arguably most utopian of genres as 'dilettantism and chaff' (Bloch, 1986: 617), a merely 'cheerful, entertaining form' (Münster, 1977: 71). Carl Freedman's argument that SF 'enjoys a privileged affinity with critical, dialectical theory' (Freedman, 2000: 41) therefore seems to run directly contrary to the original German sense of *Kritische Theorie*. Yet much of the more theoretically sophisticated work in academic SF studies takes inspiration from precisely this tradition. Darko Suvin's *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, widely regarded as the foundational text in the field, is deeply indebted both to Bloch and to Bertolt Brecht; Tom Moylan's *Demand the Impossible* to Bloch; and Fredric Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future* to Adorno, Brecht, Bloch and Georg Lukács (Suvin, 1979; Moylan, 1986; Jameson, 2005).

Moreover, in two particularly influential instances of more recent French critical theory – Jean Baudrillard and Gilles Deleuze – SF occupies an unusually central location in relation to the theory itself. The key notion in Baudrillard is, of course, simulation. In *Simulation and Simulacra* – extracts from which were first published in English translation in the journal *Science Fiction Studies* (Baudrillard, 1991) – he argues that each of his three successive post-Renaissance 'orders of simulacra' were accompanied by a corresponding 'imaginary': utopia in the first, SF in the second, and a new 'implosive' fiction 'in the process of emerging' in the third. He cites the two leading Anglophone 'New Wave' SF writers, Philip K. Dick and J.G. Ballard, as key instances of this 'science fiction that is no longer one'. Commenting on the latter's *Crash*, Baudrillard famously concluded that 'there is neither fiction nor reality anymore – hyperreality abolishes both ... science fiction in this sense is no longer anywhere, it is everywhere, in the circulation of models, here and now'. Hence, his judgement that *Crash* 'is the first great novel of the universe of simulation' (Baudrillard, 1994: 119–26).

Deleuze was also happy to cite SF as a theoretical resource, at one point going so far as to argue that 'philosophy should be in part ... a kind of science fiction' (Deleuze, 2004: xix). In their *A Thousand Plateaus*, he and Félix Guattari draw on a number of SF texts, from Daniel Mann's *Willard* to Richard Matheson's *Shrinking Man* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 233, 279). Citing Matheson and Isaac Asimov as 'of particular importance', they conclude that '[s]cience fiction has gone through a whole evolution taking it from animal, vegetable, and mineral becomings to becomings of bacteria, viruses, molecules' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 248, 540n23). What the society of simulation was to Baudrillard, the society of control is to Deleuze; and what Ballard was to Baudrillard, William S. Burroughs is to Deleuze. So Deleuze traces the notion of control not only to Foucault, as is commonly acknowledged, but also to Burroughs (Deleuze, 1992: 4; 1995: 174). Indeed, the latter remained an enduring influence on Deleuze, right through from *A Thousand Plateaus* to *Negotiations* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 152–3; Deleuze, 1995: 23).

Finally, we might note that SF performs a significant role in two Anglophone variants of what might also be considered critical theory, Raymond Williams's 'cultural materialism' and Donna Haraway's 'posthumanism'. Like Baudrillard and Deleuze, Williams had an enduring interest in SF, attested to, in the first instance, by two articles specifically addressed to the genre, both of which were eventually published in *Science Fiction Studies* (Williams, 1978a, 1988). But there is also a wide range of references to the genre

in his central theoretical texts (Williams, 1958: 148–58, 285–94; 1961: 280–1, 285–9; 1973: 272–8). Finally, we should note that Williams was also the author of two 'future novels', one of which is clearly science fictional in character (Williams, 1978b).

Haraway famously synthesized the claims of post-structuralist theory, new technologies for re-embodiment and dis-embodiment, and feminist politics in her 'Cyborg Manifesto', which eagerly anticipated a 'cyborg world … in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines' (Haraway, 1991: 154). 'The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self', she argued: 'This is the self feminists must code' (Haraway, 1991: 163). These and similar notions have been widely canvassed in philosophy and in social and cultural theory, from Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies* and N. Katherine Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman* through to Chris Gray's *Cyborg Citizen* and Francis Fukayama's *Our Posthuman Future* (Grosz, 1994; Hayles, 1999; Gray, 2001; Fukayama, 2002). They are also central to much contemporary cyberpunk and post-cyberpunk SF.

What, then, of historical sociology? Sociological interest in SF has tended to focus on three main substantive topics: social-science fiction; the social geography of the genre; and the social demography of its audiences (Ritzer, 2007: 3495). Whilst no doubt intrinsically interesting, social geography and social demography are nonetheless clearly instances of what Horkheimer understood by 'traditional' – that is, positivist – as distinct from 'critical' sociology. Horkheimer argued that, where positivism conceives of itself as condensed description of 'the actual facts' of the present, critical theory understands the social world as changeable, thereby stripping reality of its character as 'pure factuality' (Horkheimer, 1972: 188, 209). Hence, his conclusion that: 'critical theory … never aims simply at an increase of knowledge as such. Its goal is man's emancipation from slavery' (Horkheimer, 1972: 246). Some social-science fiction is no doubt traditional in Horkheimer's sense, especially that which deals in imaginary social sciences such as Isaac Asimov's 'psychohistory'. But social-science fiction is normally concerned not so much with social science as with society itself. It therefore often takes the form of a fictional 'utopia', that is, a no place, either in the positive variant of 'eutopia', or good place, or the negative of 'dystopia', or bad place (Sargent, 1994: 7–10).

The good places of utopia are rarely represented as perfect or ideal societies, although it is a common misconception to imagine them so. There are, of course, occasional perfect worlds both in utopia and in SF, but these are only ever a limit case, a sub-class of the much wider species of merely better worlds. Moreover, as we move from eutopia to dystopia, it becomes clear that these are necessarily comparatives, since absolute imperfection beggars both description and articulation. Hence, Suvin's very proper insistence that in eutopia social relations are merely '*organized more perfectly*' (1979: 45); or Williams's that eutopia entails 'a happier life', dystopia a 'more wretched kind of life' (Williams, 1978a: 203–4). Compared to what, one might then ask. The answer cannot be simply to the author's own opinions or ideals, but rather, as Suvin argued, to '*the author's community*' (Suvin, 1979: 45).

Utopia is a far older genre than SF. It is one of the defining features, however, of Suvinian sociocriticism, which clearly influences Moylan, Freedman and Jameson, that SF be understood as retrospectively 'englobing' utopia, thereby in effect transforming the latter into '*the socio-political subgenre of science fiction*' (Suvin, 1979: 61). Neither

Baudrillard nor Williams push the argument quite so far, but both nonetheless see utopia and SF as closely cognate genres. Even this more moderate position might in fact be an overstatement. SF can indeed be occasionally eutopian, but it has more often been dystopian, and it is yet more often neither. Most SF works with social worlds almost identical to the author's own, but altered slightly by the presence of counter-factual scientific or technological innovations: the obvious example is the monster in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the genre's foundational text. These are what Suvin means by the 'novum', the '*novelty, innovation … validated by cognitive logic*' dominating the narrative (1979: 63). No matter how striking the novelty of the scientific novum in such cases, the social world remains much as represented by positivism, that is, in Horkheimer's phrase, as a condensed description of the actual facts of the present. But, as we move from natural- to social-science fiction, so the novum acquires potential to open up the gap between the real and the possible in much the same fashion as in critical sociology. This can be as true of dystopian SF as of eutopian. For when the dystopia functions as a warning with genuinely eutopian intent, then it becomes, in Moylan's phrase, a 'critical dystopia', which lingers 'in the terrors of the present' even as it also exemplifies 'what is needed to transform it' (Moylan, 2000: 198–9). Each of the papers gathered here deals with social-science fictions of this kind, whether in literature, film, television or immersive theatre.

Imagining science fiction dangerously

At its most ambitious, SF has understood itself to be an unusually 'dangerous' genre: hence, Harlan Ellison's decision to bring together the foundational texts of the American 'New Wave' in volumes entitled *Dangerous Visions* (1967) and *Again, Dangerous Visions* (1972). The articles gathered together in this special issue of *Thesis Eleven* explore the context and concept of imagining danger in order to dialogue with the formal, narrational, thematic and ideological concerns that emerge out of the best – and perhaps the worst – of science fiction dreaming. We choose the word 'imagining' not simply as a gesture towards the future-present world-building that takes place in SF, but also as a way of drawing attention to the centrality of the imagination in bare political life and the power struggles that take place when one dares to think – imagine – the world differently. Of course, in SF scholarship the concept of imagination has been directly linked to that of danger. Susan Sontag, for example, wrote of the imagination of disaster, where 'one can participate in the fantasy of living through one's own death and more, the death of cities, the destruction of humanity itself' (1965). Jameson famously observed that:

> Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world. (2003: 76)

Imagining SF dangerously is, then, a conceptualization that allows us to conjure up the dialectic that divides SF's two centrifugal hearts. On the one hand, we see inherent ideological and cultural problems in the way the genre thinks the future, insofar as it can be seen to support neoliberal fantasies of the self and the nation-state, the science-

military nexus and the inherent fascism of restrictive identity politics. One can read *Interstellar* (Nolan, 2014), for example, as a text which ensures that whiteness – in consort and coherence with military-technological advancement – rescues humanity, ensuring its continued progenation. Whiteness or the white hero myth saves the universe, a position that Richard Dyer discusses in relation to *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982):

> The whitest of hue are the replicants, especially the two most formidable in resisting Deckard, Roy (Rutger Hauer) and Pris (Daryl Hannah) who both have pale faces and bleached blonde hair. The casting of Hauer, unmistakably Teutonic, and thus at the top of the Caucasian tree, is especially suggestive. (Dyer, 1997: 214)

Danger in this context is meant to refer to the way SF manufactures identity consent, to appropriate Noam Chomsky's term for the controlling ideological work undertaken in much escapist popular culture.

On the other hand, we see SF as a genre that challenges and critiques the status quo. It has the ability to imagine other worlds that work in opposition and contradiction to the habitus of contemporary life. Under this resistance canopy, SF can be seen to offer us the chance to transgress identity positions, question authority and create affecting relations that involve ruptures at the level of feeling and cognition. The work of SF can, in short, simply be sublime. In *Under the Skin* (Glazer, 2013), for example, the loneliness and isolation of modern existence is both revealed and rejected: the film draws attention to the crisis of community and seeks to leave it behind through forms of deathly atomization.

Of course, the inherent truth of the dialectic of SF endangerment is that its two halves exist in relational proximity and connectedness, particularly in and through the way science is represented. As Ziauddin Sardar suggests, 'science fiction is both afraid of science and in love with science' (2002: 5). This 'doubling' (Telotte, 1990) manifests itself in two opposed ways, as Hugh Ruppersberg suggests:

> Science fiction … often assumes a rather confused attitude toward science and technology. On the one hand, it views them as redemptive forces that can lift humanity out of the muck and mire of its own biological imperfections. On the other, it sees them as potentially destructive forces, inimical to humanity. What small hope there is, here on earth or elsewhere, lies in the human imagination and heart. (1990: 32)

The figures of the cyborg and the alien exist at both these vexing poles of science endangerment: they establish that the body can be rematerialized and resignified; and they suggest that it can be both undone and over-taken, controlled by forces outside of its agency and control. This deconstruction and reconstruction of the body is thus endangering in two opposed ways: it creates the conditions for new forms of identity to emerge; and it prophesies the loss of freedoms in a new age of virtual and bionic augmentation.

Augmentation is perhaps one of the central structuring concerns of contemporary SF, pointing us towards the way the world is increasingly experienced through bodies that are electronically modified, that move in spaces which are wired and connected, and which are involved or engaged in communication with fields and nodes that seem infinite

and overpowering, and yet deeply and impressionably personal. The screens of reality are 'overlaid with dynamically changing information, multimedia in form and localized for each user' (Manovich, 2006: 220). Augmentation, of course, also establishes the present human condition as having entered a posthuman state, or the time of 'Me++ . . . man-computer symbiosis' (Mitchell, 2003). We here use the theme of augmentation to draw an apocalyptic line in the technological sand: we see the grainy pixels of the virtual in much of the writing contained in this collection. But we also see humankind as standing at the threshold of revolutionary uncertainty, on the cliffs of the abyss, faced with their own annihilation – a kind of destruction that comes from within rather than from afar. There has never been as much danger in SF and in the social world with which it couples. Taken as a collection, the articles gathered here direct us towards the complexities that SF plays in relation to endangerment. The genre's dangerous dialectic enables us to look for its liberties and freedoms, but also to see its limitations and constraints.

In the issue

We have attempted in this special issue to include voices that recognize the power of SF to threaten the established order of things and open up critical spaces for audiences to make new sense of everyday life and the ideological flows that operate there. But we also include voices that suggest we might be losing sight of the conservative dangers of the genre, even as we celebrate its subversive possibilities. Is the danger in imagining SF, in fact, one that invariably reinforces dominant ideology and repressive or oppressive pleasures? Where now, if at all, is the danger in SF? The articles included in this special issue take us across key forms and seminal texts, diverse and divergent theoretical and methodological approaches, their authors detecting both the transformative possibilities of the genre and its potentially iron grip.

In the opening essay, Andrew Milner, JR Burgmann, Rjurik Davidson and Susan Cousin explore the sub-genre of 'cli-fi', making critical sense of SF's central location within the nature/culture nexus out of which it is often enunciated. Both product of, and response to, climate science, SF texts that deal with anthropogenic climate change do so within certain narrative and thematic consistencies, which the article seeks to identify. It concludes with a detailed discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of three influential examples of literary clifi, George Turner's *The Sea and Summer* (1987), Frank Schätzing's *Der Schwarm* (2004) and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Science in the Capital Trilogy* (2004–7).

Fran Pheasant-Kelly's article examines the transgressive nature of science in three recent SF films, Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* (2012), Gary Ross's *The Hunger Games* (2012) and Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009). She considers how fictional science, freed from the ethical constraints that regulate real-world experimentation, can lead to critical and potentially apocalyptic outcomes. The article explores the way the unpredictable nature of advances in science and technology, in combination with a lack of ethics (either in the real or the fictional world), can foreground the dangerous dimensions of SF. In a second essay on SF cinema, David Sweeney explores the way that the oppositional logic of nostalgia and presentism calibrates a great deal of contemporary

time travel science fiction film. He asks the question, 'what does such a cultural condition mean for science fiction cinema and its vision of the future? With a focus on Zal Batmanglij's *Sound of My Voice* (2011), Rian Johnson's *Looper* (2012) and Richard Curtis's *About Time* (2013), Sweeney discusses the representation of a present, the sense of the future and the function of nostalgia in each film.

The two immediately following articles are devoted to television SF. Sean Redmond's historical and contextual article begins with an examination of the 1970s and 1980s, predominantly in the UK, to suggest that the time travel sequence found in television series such as *Dr Who* expanded the viewer's material universe, and affectively wrenched the television set free from the strictures of scheduling and realist programming. He then goes on to argue that, rather than the contemporary time travel television series being an extraordinary alternative to ordinary life, they instead articulate convergence culture, deregulation, multiple channel viewing, and time-shift culture, where there is no such thing as an ordinary working day or domestic viewing context. The irony here, he points out, is that the once sublime wonder of television time travel becomes potentially commonplace and, therefore, ultimately ordinary. Where is the danger there? Steven Gil's article explores the question: is *The X-Files* dangerous to SF and science? On the one hand, he argues that it seems to challenge and sometimes eschew basic conceptualizations of the genre and of the shibboleths of science fact. However, he suggests that detailed analysis of the series reveals quite a different picture. Firstly, even attempts to distance the series from SF effectively encapsulate reasons for that very labelling. These specifically revolve around the use of the phrase 'extreme possibilities'. Secondly, far from presenting a simplistic juxtaposition of belief and reason, Gil suggests that the series instead involves a dialogic exchange that helps to articulate the role of scientific inquiry in approaching the unknown.

Amedeo D'Adamo's study of Robinson's *Mars Trilogy* (1993–6) suggests that the most serious problem for anyone attempting to create dangerous SF today is that the developed countries now largely inhabit a post-transgressive culture. The exception to this observation, he argues, is the border between scarcity and post-scarcity. His close textual analysis of the *Trilogy* shows how Robinson envisions an end, not only to the economic problem of poverty, but also to the social, anthropological and psychical forces of scarcity. Briohny Doyle's article explores the very limits and possibilities of end of days fiction, framing the postapocalypse, not as a literature of pessimism or warning, but rather as a radical vehicle to explore dangerous possibilities without rehearsing the apocalypse's characteristic narrative of damnation, salvation and revelation. Teri Howson's closing piece explores the power of immersive theatre in its particular use of dystopian narratives and alternate worlds, reflecting on the way these works destabilize and call into question the audience's sense of self, through their ability either to survive or to understand their own being-in-the-world. Howson reflects on her own practice, identifying and de-mystifying immersive theatre and the differences between it and conventional theatre.

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