The Lure of Scientifiction

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SCIENTIFICITON is not a new thing on this planet. While Edgar Allan Poe probably was one of the first to conceive the idea of a scientific story, there are suspicions that there were other scientifiction authors before him. Perhaps they were not such outstanding figures in literature, and perhaps they did not write what we understand today as scientifiction at all. Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), a great genius, while he was not really an author of scientifiction, nevertheless had enough prophetic vision to create a number of machines in his own mind that were only to materialize centuries later. He described a number of machines, seemingly fantastic in those days, which would have done credit to a Jules Verne.[1]

There may have been other scientific prophets, if not scientifiction writers, before his time, but the past centuries are so beclouded, and there are so few manuscripts of such literature in existence today, that we cannot really be sure who was the real inventor of scientifiction.

In the eleventh century there also lived a Franciscan monk, the amazing as well as famous Roger Bacon (1214-1294). He had a most astounding and prolific imagination, with which he foresaw many of our present-day wonders. But as an author of scientifiction, he had to be extremely careful, because in those days it was not "healthy" to predict new and startling inventions. It was necessary to disguise the manuscript—to use a cypher—as a matter of fact, so that it has taken many great modern minds to unravel the astonishing scientific prophesies

[1] Gernsback: "Da Vinci—the Edison of the Middle Ages—is credited with having first imagined the printing press, the breech-loading gun, the mitrailleuse gun, the steam engine, the chain drive, a man-propelled airplane, the parachute and many others—an amazing array of"scientifiction"—because he admittedly only imagined these inventions."

of Roger Bacon.[2]

The scientifiction writer of today is somewhat more fortunate—but not so very much more. It is true that we do not behead him or throw him into a dungeon when he dares to blaze forth with, what seems to us, an impossible tale, but in our inner minds, we are just as intolerant today, as were the contemporaries of Roger Bacon. We have not learned much in the interval. Even such a comparatively tame invention as the submarine, which was predicted by Jules Verne, was greeted with derisive laughter, and he was denounced in many quarters. Still, only forty years after the prediction of the modern submarine by Verne, it has become a reality.

There are few things written by our scientifiction writers, frankly impossible today, that may not become a reality tomorrow. Frequently, the author himself does not realize that his very fantastic yarn may come true in the future, and often he, himself, does not take his prediction seriously.

But the seriously-minded scientifiction reader absorbs the knowledge contained in such stories with avidity, with the result that such stories prove an incentive in starting some one to work on a device or invention suggested by some author of scientifiction.

One of our great surprises since started publishing AMAZING STORIES is the tremendous amount of mail we receive from—shall we call them "Scientifiction Fans"?—who seem to be pretty well orientated in this sort of literature. From the suggestions for reprints that are coming in, these "fans" seem to have a hobby all their own of hunting up scientifiction stories, not only in English, but in many other languages.[3] There is not a day, now, that passes, but we get from

[2]Gernsback: "In his famous *Opus Majus* he accurately prophesied the telescope. He gave excellent descriptions of the *camera obscura,* and of the burning glass—even the invention of gun powder is accredited to him. He forecast an age of industry and invention, with all prominence given to experiment. As a reward for his immortal work, he was incarcerated for a number of years."

[3]In his book on fandom as a form of participatory culture, Henry Jenkins provides an etymology:

> "Fan" is an abbreviated form of the word "fanatic," which has its roots in the Latin word "fanaticus." In its most literal sense, "fanaticus" simply meant "Of or belonging to the temple, a temple servant, a devotee" but it quickly assumed more negative connotations, "Of persons inspired by orgiastic rites and enthusiastic frenzy" (*Oxford Latin Dictionary*). As it evolved, the term "fanatic" moved from a reference to certain excessive forms of religious belief and worship to any "excessive and mistaken enthusiasm," often evoked in criticism to opposing political beliefs, and then, more generally, to madness "such as might result from possession by a deity or demon" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Its abbreviated form, "fan," first appeared in the late 19th century in journalistic accounts describing followers of professional sports teams (especially in baseball) at a time when the sport moved from a predominantly participant activity to a spectator event, but soon was expanded to incorporate any faithful "devotee" of sports or commercial entertainment. One of its earliest uses was in reference to women theater-goers, "Matinee Girls," who male critics claimed had come to admire the actors rather than the plays. If the term "fan" was originally evoked in a somewhat playful fashion and was often used sympathetically by sports writers,

a dozen to fifty suggestions as to stories of which, frankly, we have no record, although we have a list of some 600 or 700 scientifiction stories.[4] Some of these fans are constantly visiting the book stores with the express purpose of buying new or old scientifiction tales, and they even go to the trouble of advertising for some volumes that have long ago gone out of print.

Scientifiction, in other words, furnishes a tremendous amount of scientific education and fires the reader's imagination more perhaps than anything else of which we know.[^nwn]

> it never fully escaped its earlier connotations of religious and political zealotry, false beliefs, orgiastic excess, possession, and madness, connotations that seem to be at the heart of many of the representations of fans in contemporary discourse.

Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers : television Fans & Participatory Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 12-13.

For a history of science fiction fandom, see Sam Moskowitz, *Immortal Storm: A History of Science Fiction Fandom*, (Westport, Conn: Hyperion, 1974).

[4] In its earliest days, the new genre of scientifiction thus involved a concerted effort to dig back into the archives and construct a tradition upon which to build. John Cheng comments on Gernsback's reaction to the fan letters:

"Although he suggested surprise, Gernsback's strategy to increase and maintain his readership involved fostering a sense of participation and affiliation among his readers. Another early editorial asked readers directly to help increase *Amazing's* circulation … explaining that an increased circulation would benefit readers because it would allow him to publish a larger magazine with more stories. Notwithstanding the credibility of Gernsback's claims for additional material, his editorial rhetoric included readers by negotiating their responsibility for the magazine. While Gernsback and *Amazing* pledged to 'do our part,' he argued that the success of the magazine depended ultimately on readers doing theirs. If they continued to buy magazines and encouraged their friends to buy them too, they would be the ones to gain with a larger magazine and more material to read."

John Cheng, *Astounding Wonder: Imagining Science and Science Fiction in Interwar America*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), p. 53.