

THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

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PUSHING THE WORLD IN A CERTAIN DIRECTION AND OTHER ACTS OF SUBMISSION

George Orwell, in his oft-quoted essay “Why I Write” (1946), asserts that in every writer there “exist in different degrees” four motives for writing: sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse, and political purpose. Elaborating on this last one, he notes: “using the word ‘political’ in the widest possible sense. Desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people’s idea of the kind of society that they should strive after. Once again, no book is genuinely free from political bias. The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude.”

Literary and cultural theory from the 1960s onward has emphasized this political dimension of writing, often compressing it into the dictum that “all writing is political,” or even more generally, “all art is political.” These words have been used in the science fiction community, too: for a recent example, consider Kameron Hurley’s thought-provoking essay “The Status Quo Is Not a Neutral Position: Fiction and Politics” (*Locus Magazine*, October 2014). Other notable writers who have made a similar point about politics in art include Vandana Singh, Catherynne M. Valente, Rachel Swirsky, Gareth L. Powell, and Samuel Delany (specifically but not exclusively in his 1990 interview in *Science Fiction Studies*).

Books that appear to be non-political, the argument goes, probably appear so because they’re written from a perspective that agrees with predominant contemporary values, whatever those might be. Politics are there, but merely invisible to most readers: a text embedded in a certain values-context transmits those values even if it doesn’t make a point of doing so. You may think you’re reading (or have simply written) an apolitical space opera or a steampunk thriller designed purely to entertain and enthrall readers, but politics have crept in whether you want them to or not.

Very well. Fiction has a political dimension. The word “politics,” after all, derives etymologically from “polis,” the ancient Greek term for city-state, and it’s difficult indeed to think of modern-day stories—particularly in a field that boasts works like Clifford Simak’s *City* (1952), Robert Silverberg’s *The World Inside* (1971), Samuel R. Delany’s *Dhalgren* (1975), C.J. Cherryh’s *Sunfall* (1981), Pat Murphy’s *The City, Not Long After* (1989), or Kathleen Ann Goonan’s *Queen City Jazz* (1994)—that elide the notion of cities or aren’t in dialogue with it in some way. And if we generalize “city” to “societal matrix” or even “world,” it would seem nearly impossible to find an SF text that doesn’t indeed depend in some central way on a political extrapolation. It’s safe to say that any ably created fictional world will contain gender and race values and hierarchies and power relations. There may be readers who benefit from the reminder that even the most frivolous entertainment transmits a vision of the world and is thus not free from political bias—such as reflecting the status quo.

Consider yourself reminded.

And yet it’s fair to ask if simply because a science fiction author creates a world and shows us how that world works, as part of the necessary background to tell his or her story, that really means the author is trying to “alter other people’s idea of the kind of society that they should strive after.” In some cases, the answer appears to be a resounding yes. Dystopias, for example, can be warnings. A writer may be signaling to

us that if we allow X trends or Y events to unfold unheeded, a terrible fate will befall us all. That writer may earnestly believe that the best and most visceral way for us to grasp the horrors of such a fate and thus prevent it is by reading his or her story, conveniently available now as an e-book for just \$2.99.

In other cases, though, a story's world may simply be part of a larger thought experiment, not reflective of the author's belief that we should either strive after it or steer away from it. Consider Ted Chiang's Hugo-winning story "Exhalation" (2009), or Jack Vance's *Dying Earth* stories, or Avram Davidson's *Vergil Magus* cycle, or Robert Silverberg's *Nightwings*. Are we really to believe that the worlds contained in these fine narratives are meant as either warnings or enticements? That seems like a belittlement of their creators' skills.

Another difficulty with the all-art-is-political reasoning is that it doesn't seem to be saying something *specific* about art. If our notion of political writing is writing that, in the broadest sense, wants "to push the world in a certain direction," then aren't *all* human endeavors intrinsically political? Everything we do pushes the world one way or another. Your next breath, according to this criterion, is a political act, because by electing to continue your existence rather than committing suicide you are pushing the world in the direction of your own continued involvement with it, while simultaneously broadcasting to those around you your belief that life, in the current political matrix, is intrinsically worth living, at least for right now.

The proposition that all art is political is weak because it is too broad. But it's also weak because, returning to Orwell, it foregrounds just one of four (and potentially many more) elements. If all writing is political, then all writing is also, to use the Orwellian scheme, egotistic, aesthetic, and historical. (Regarding that first item, Orwell goes on to say that "All writers are vain, selfish, and lazy, and at the very bottom of their motives there lies a mystery." This sentiment appears to have gained less traction with theorists, critics, and writers than the all-writing-is-political catchphrase.) So we could accurately, but not particularly helpfully, say that all writing is simultaneously political *and* non-political.

Of course in science fiction, as elsewhere, some texts engage in political discourse more loudly than others. They examine the political process explicitly or look at the results of specific political philosophies as applied to extrapolated societies, for example to critically explore the notion of utopias. H.G. Wells' *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1910), Robert Heinlein's *Double Star* (1956) and *Starship Troopers* (1959), Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), Robert Silverberg's *The Stochastic Man* (1975), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* trilogy (1993–1996) do this and more. For a detailed discussion centered around these texts, we recommend Ken Macleod's "Politics and Science Fiction" and Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.'s "Marxist Theory and Science Fiction" in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (2003), and Neil Easterbrook's "Libertarianism and Anarchism" and Philip E. Wegner's "Utopianism" in *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction* (2014).

But even in key works of political science fiction like the above noted, there are many other elements we shouldn't lose sight of. Even the most didactic of novels, if it is to remain an actual enjoyable story (the better, perhaps, to sneak its message across the reader's defenses), must contain the elements of good fiction. The sense of bonding and camaraderie conveyed in *Starship Troopers* could just as well have come from some harmless bildungsroman about one summer's life-changing dangers at a sleepover camp for teens. The domestic elements of Russ's *Whileaway* are universal.

In fact, we should remember that texts themselves don't really "contain" politics or sociology or psychoanalysis or post-colonialism or anything else in the same way

that a basket contains eggs. These textual elements aren't objectively discoverable separate from our interpretations and opinions of them.

A nifty illustration of just how greatly a reader's experience and expectations affect the reading of a particular book was provided by Robert Silverberg in his "Reflections" column in these pages ("Robert A. Heinlein, Author of *The Martian Chronicles*" in the October/November 2014 issue). In this piece Silverberg illustrates how our interpretation of a famous science fiction work can be transformed by merely attributing to it a different author; read, for example, Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* pretending that Heinlein wrote it, and you will find that the text is now "a galaxy apart in concept" from the Bradbury narrative we love, though not a single comma has been altered.

You might counter that this is a cute little theoretical trick, but that in practice it would be silly to misread in this way. In response to which we would challenge: Can we avoid this phenomenon of contrasting expectations, even if we want to? Who is to say, for example, that my mental image of Ursula K. Le Guin is the same as yours? We are unlikely to have read the same works by and about her in the same order. Even if we had, we're even more unlikely to have received the same impressions from those readings. And if our mental images of Le Guin differ, won't we consequently bring different expectations to her work the next time we sit down with it? It may not be as extreme a case as Bradbury vs. Heinlein, but there may nevertheless exist far-reaching differences between my Le Guin and yours, differences that place our respective readings of her stories solar systems, if not quite galaxies, apart.

But this isn't really a problem. In fact, it's part of the fundamental joy and art of reading (and even misreading). It is up to us as individual readers to explore the various facets of a text and decide for ourselves which ones shine most brilliantly. We bring our unique experiences and skills to a text and with them try to inhabit that text as fully as possible. The novelist, editor, translator, and lifelong bibliophile Alberto Manguel expresses this eloquently by saying that one of the tasks of a reader is "to be the magician's audience."

Of course there is a limit to the differences in our interpretations, beyond which we are simply talking past one another—and quite possibly the text. Allowing ourselves to be captivated by the magic of reading does not mean we're running the show; the magician is still ultimately in control. Manguel rightly cautions us that "the open-endedness of a text can of course be carried to the absurd, and it is the reader's task to see that this does not happen." Moderation and thoughtfulness are key.

To approach all texts as political is to give up part of the pleasure and enormous reward of figuring out the texts for ourselves. It is to willingly forfeit our *engagement* with an author's work and to prejudice it instead. If anything, that's an act of submission, rather than an act of resistance to power.

Reading is a game to which we're all invited. Thinking of all books as political encumbers our freedom to play and discover their meaning for ourselves. It would be like telling ourselves that the illusions and tricks in a magician's show are all political. Well, perhaps, but will that really contribute to the enjoyment of the magic?

Join us on a flash tour of some recent Hugo-winning novels: Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Justice* (2013), John Scalzi's *Redshirts* (2012), Jo Walton's *Among Others* (2011), Connie Willis' *Blackout/All Clear* (2010), Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2009), and China Miéville's *The City & The City* (2009). Now try to decide: which of these is more political, and what are the politics involved in each case? A certain reader may find almost no political content in Willis' duology, say, but an abundance of it in Walton's, and her neighbor may feel the exact opposite is true—and that's before they even start discussing specifics. Such disagreement is an inevitable and healthy reflection of individual and idiosyncratic responses to texts. Saying that all these novels are political may

be tautologically true—they all contain societies different from ours in space and time—but it doesn't advance our understanding of or appreciation for them.

Science fiction can excel at challenging our assumptions about gender, politics, race, economics, or just about anything else—but we must let it. As Jonathan Culler says in his introduction to *Literary Theory*: “Literature has been given diametrically opposed functions. Is literature an ideological instrument: a set of stories that seduce readers into accepting the hierarchical arrangements of society? . . . Or is literature the place where ideology is exposed, revealed as something that can be questioned. . . . Both claims are thoroughly plausible: that literature is the vehicle of ideology and that literature is an instrument for its undoing.” Repeatedly emphasizing the former without recalling the latter gives us a narrow and distorted perspective.

But there are even other reasons to argue against any universality of a political substratum in the arts, and there is also the consideration of alternative attitudes toward life that belie Orwell's insistence on politics as the dominant mode of social interaction. As well, a couple of thought experiments might convey the futility of interpreting all artistic creations by the light of political stances, intentional or unconscious.

If we concede that politics is inescapable, then its very ubiquity renders it no more than the blank canvas upon which more important stories and narrative values are foregrounded. In this sense, the famous analogy of the disregard that fish are mythically presumed to have for water can be trotted out. One can easily imagine, as SF has so often done before, a race of sapient beings who dwell in an aquatic environment. One recent excellent example along these lines is *A Darkling Sea* (2014) by James Cambias (a novel whose politics are explicit and well integrated into the story). What kind of artworks would such beings produce? Yes, some of their tales might consist of nothing more than a catalogue of the different flavors and temperatures and even textures of the waters of their region, extolling the gourmet qualities of different zones, or expressing repugnance at the sulfur vents. But any such literature would quickly become exhausted and repetitive. New tales about the beauties of strange coral reefs and frightening denizens of the deep, clashes between tribes and explorations of virgin territories, the pleasures of nesting, mating, and the losses of death would soon come to supplant any primitive focus on an all-surrounding medium that is simply an existential given.

To use another analogy, politics are merely background noise for most artistic works. There is a kind of process at play akin to the body's habit of “sensory adaptation.” A constant stimulus is gradually filtered out of one's perceptions. An author does not generally bother to include politics in a story because to do so would be the same as saying a character could feel her hair follicles growing.

Orwell and his followers felt and continue to feel that *homo sapiens* is ineluctably a political animal, and that politics is the default mode of intercourse. Simply to state this outright is almost immediately sufficient to intuitively refute it. Numerous other methods whereby individuals relate to individuals, and groups to groups, spring to mind. Commercial transactions, altruistic transactions, sexual transactions, esthetic transactions, spiritual transactions, cooperative survival transactions—the list of alternative interpersonal and intergroup modes of communication, cooperation, and contest far outweighs the limited protocols of politics. To privilege politics, as we have earlier hinted, as the one filter or lens through which all human behavior and creations must be viewed is like privileging one particular culture as the planetary norm. Imagine a novel about the Chinese invasion of Tibet that focused on realpolitik and never mentioned the Dalai Lama or Buddhism.

Fantastika has shown us numerous instances of cultures where politics were minimized or nonexistent or of variable importance. Two examples should suffice.

Gordon Dickson's *Childe Cycle* postulated a galactic future in which humanity has splintered into three basic camps: the Dorsai (who exemplify Courage), the Exotics (Philosophy), and the Friendlies (Faith and/or Fanaticism). To claim that any of these three polities practiced politics as we currently understand it is to misread Dickson's whole presentation.

On a similar note, the fantasist James Branch Cabell was wont to divide personalities along three lines: the poetic, the chivalrous, and the gallant. Each type had a mode of navigating through society that had little to do with any kind of practical politics.

Coincidentally with the composition of this essay, and most handily, the New York *Times* ran illuminating parallel opinion pieces by Ayana Mathis and Pankaj Mishra considering the utility and significance of a famously political novel, *Native Son* (1940), by Richard Wright. Mathis says: "James Baldwin excoriated the protest novel as a pamphlet in literary disguise, tenanted by caricatures in service to a social or political agenda. Its failure, he wrote, lay in 'its insistence that it is . . . categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended.'"

Here we find the essence of why politics can be at odds with the esthetic aims and techniques of art. Politics deals with categories, the undifferentiated masses, whereas art does just the opposite. The two modes are at heart incongruent. To the degree that a piece of fiction is politicized, its other traditional literary elements must suffer, acting as mere slaves to the political impulses.

Consider this: one author of this essay is a sixty-year-old white male, of a certain voting pattern, certain consumer habits, a certain income and certain lifestyle, certain ethnicity and upbringing and education. From these factors, one might well make some fairly accurate predictions on that author's political beliefs and voting patterns. But nothing in that author's political profile can tell an observer how he will behave should he turn a street corner and encounter a mugging in progress, or an escaped lion. Nothing can be reliably deduced about his tastes in music or film, food, or landscape. The political facts about any individual do not limn the soul or heart or intellect, which are abiding concerns of literature. To the degree that one constructs a fictional character to fit into some political niche, so do they lose individuality. In the eyes of a politician, humans are seen as gender-based, race-based, ethnic-based consumption units whose programming can be modified with the adroit use of symbols and rhetoric. To the writer of fiction, humans are creatures halfway between angel and ape, unpredictable and wily, hateful and loving, noble and vile, containing infinite possibilities inside a frail vessel of demanding flesh. The two paradigms could not be more antithetical. And likewise, the more a plot is slanted along political lines, the less organic and surprising it becomes.

We have adduced a few examples of books for which a primarily political reading is a gross injustice. Here are some more: E. Nesbit's *Five Children and It* (1902), William Hope Hodgson's *The House on the Borderland* (1908), David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus* (1920), Olaf Stapledon's *Star Maker* (1937), Ray Bradbury's *Dark Carnival* (1947), Theodore Sturgeon's *More Than Human* (1953), Hal Clement's *Mission of Gravity* (1954), J.G. Ballard's *The Burning World* (1964), Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon* (1966), Anne McCaffrey's *The Ship Who Sang* (1969), Larry Niven's *Ringworld* (1970), Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* (1973), C.J. Cherryh's *Downbelow Station* (1981) and *Cyteen* (1988), John Crowley's *Little, Big* (1981), Dan Simmons's *Hyperion* (1989), Karen Joy Fowler's *Sarah Canary* (1991), Connie Willis' *Doomsday Book* (1992) and *To Say Nothing of the Dog* (1997), and Elizabeth Moon's *The Speed of Dark* (2002). It becomes an exercise in the parodic to try to assign contrived political schema to such novels.

And even when one can confidently unriddle the political subtext of a book, how does that contribute to appreciating its quintessentially literary achievements?

In Peter Green's fine biography of Kenneth Grahame, Green confidently lays out, with overwhelming evidence, the political subtext of Grahame's masterpiece, *The Wind in the Willows* (1908). In short, the book represents the landed gentry (Toad, Mole, et al.) against the vile rabble of upstart commoners (the Weasels). In this light, it's an elitist reactionary tract.

But has anyone, child or adult, ever enjoyed this marvelous book in this polemical manner? Does such knowledge heighten or lessen the awe one feels while reading the chapter entitled "The Piper at the Gates of Dawn," or does it remain basically irrelevant? There are far greater lessons and pleasures to be found in literature than the petty parsing of party allegiances. Is it wrong to read *The Wind in the Willows* like a bright but somewhat naïve thirteen-year-old? Was that not always the explicit standard by which fannish devotion was judged, and the very force that drives so many adults today into the embrace of YA novels?

Politics is essentially ephemeral. The best art is essentially eternal. Therein lies the disjunction between the two realms. When reading Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* (1599), is it necessary to know the precise platforms of the rival Senatorial factions to appreciate the tragedy? Such temporary manifestos have evaporated, leaving behind only Brutus's supreme betrayal.

When you next read one of the unique stories of R.A. Lafferty, will you stop to consider that in the 1960s he once signed the famous petition circulated among the SF community that supported the presence of the USA in Vietnam? Likewise, when you enjoy a Fritz Leiber tale, will it matter that he signed the opposing document that insisted the USA withdraw from Indochina? These fleeting allegiances have faded like the snows of yesteryear, leaving behind only the artistic mountain peaks of each writer.

The energy necessary to push the world along any certain vector saps the creative powers of a fiction writer, and distracts him or her from accomplishing the primary goal: to recreate in the minds of his or her readers this world, populated with idiosyncratic individuals, and to imagine and convey worlds that never were, filled with aliens and gods, demons and angels, and fallible mortals.

If asked what he or she believes, the savvy writer might well take refuge in paraphrasing the words of R.E.M.'s "I Believe":

I have faith in coyotes and the abstractions of time, and that my shirt has holes and that change is the only reality.

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