

Thought Experiment

TOMORROW THROUGH THE PAST

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The following is adapted from remarks delivered by Allen M. Steele as Principal Speaker at the Philcon 37 science fiction convention, held November 8–10, 2013, in Cherry Hill, New Jersey.

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Philcon is the oldest science fiction convention, its origins going back to 1936 when a small group of young men—teenagers, really—got together at Milt Rothman’s house to discuss the stuff they’d been reading in pulp science fiction magazines. One of them was the 2013 Fan Guest of Honor, Bob Madle. Another person there was Fredrik Pohl, who recently passed away—as coincidence would have it—on the last day of the 2013 World Science Fiction Convention. And so were Donald Wollheim and David Kyle, both of whom would later become influential editors and publishers.

This particular period fascinates me because it was during this time that what would become a major part of American culture was being pioneered by a small group of nerdy, socially awkward East Coast kids who’d come into contact with one another through the letters pages of trashy magazines so garish that they couldn’t be read in public. Thanks to Hugo Gernsback’s old Science Fiction League, Bob, Fred, Don, and Dave would soon be joined by other young men—and, eventually, young women—whose names would become cornerstones of imaginative literature: Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, Jack Williamson, Edmond Hamilton, John W. Campbell, Jr., L. Sprague deCamp, Julius Schwartz, Scott Feldman (aka Scott Meredith), and the many others who, three years later, would be among the two hundred people who’d make their way to Caravan Hall in New York for what was rather ambitiously called the World’s Science Fiction Convention.

My interest in this is both practical and personal. On the practical side, my recent story, “The Legion of Tomorrow” (July 2014), has its roots in science fiction’s early history. But there’s also my own curiosity. I’m a science fiction writer, but I’m also a science fiction fan, and have been since 1973, when I attended my first SF convention, Kubla Khan Klave in Nashville, Tennessee, my hometown. Fred Pohl was the first major writer I met, five minutes after I walked into Kubla Khan Klave, and over the years, I’ve had the pleasure of meeting several of the other people I just mentioned. Yet, it’s not just memories of singing “Onward Sauron’s Soldiers” with Isaac Asimov or having Julie Schwartz congratulate me when I won my first Hugo for “The Death of Captain Future”—he told me then that he’d helped Ed Hamilton plot many of the original Captain Future stories of the thirties and forties—that propels my interest in SF history. I also believe that, in order to extrapolate what might happen in the future, one must study what’s happened in the past. So I think that the history of the science fiction field may give us a clue as to where the genre may go in the years to come . . . or at least should.

The internet has given two great gifts to science fiction. One is the ability for fans to wage heated, pointless feuds on a scale unimaginable to ink-stained fanzine publishers of previous generations. The other is access to the earliest issues of *Amazing* and *Astounding*. What were once rare and extremely expensive artifacts can now be downloaded, for free or at least dirt cheap, from various digital archives. I’m now able to carry the first two years of *Astounding* on my iPad and iPhone, where I can read them without fear of having them disintegrate merely by turning a page.

This came in handy during Balticon last spring, when my wife had to rush me to the hospital because my kidneys decided that Sunday morning at four A.M. would be an excellent time to pass a few stones. While lying on a bed in the emergency room, I distracted myself by reading *The Beetle Horde* by Victor Rousseau, the first serial published in *Astounding*, which appeared in the inaugural January 1930 issue. The cover art tells it all: a heroic dude wearing aviator's overalls and goggles, punching out a giant bug while a cavegirl in a fur miniskirt shrinks in terror. It was a pretty good yarn, although truth be told, it was probably enhanced by the morphine the ER doctor gave me.

Rousseau's novel is a sort of a cross between H. Rider Haggard and Edgar Rice Burroughs, and probably wouldn't be enjoyed by most of today's readers, yet it's typical of the wide-open, full-throttle storytelling typical of the science fiction being published in the late twenties through the late thirties. This was the pulp era in which science fiction was really invented. Brian Aldiss makes the case for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* being the first SF novel, but I believe that it was in the pulps where SF became a distinct genre, identifiable not only by name but also intent.

I've downloaded and read the earliest issues of *Amazing*, too, but they aren't terribly impressive by today's standards. Most of the contents were reprints; H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, and Gilbert R. Serviss were the headline authors, and it was awhile before Hugo Gernsback began buying original stories. Much of what he published was rather stodgy; popular fiction was still being written in a stilted Victorian style that was a holdover from the last century, and it was awhile before the more naturalistic form of writing being developed by writers like Hemingway and Fitzgerald began making its way into the pulps. And there was also Gernsback's notion that the main purpose of "scientific" was to interest and educate young people in science. A typical *Amazing* story of the late twenties was likely to include a long discourse by a fictional professor on some imaginary scientific theory or engineering feat, complete with equations conveniently scribbled on a blackboard.

It took the arrival of a competitor, *Astounding*, and a new generation of writers, including Williamson, Hamilton, and Edward E. "Doc" Smith, for old-school scientific to be replaced by the new-school science fiction. And there was another change, one that was more subtle and can only be detected in hindsight. Until around 1930, SF tended to be grounded in the present day. Even when they involved events taking place long after the current calendar year, the stories usually begin with the protagonist falling into suspended animation and waking up in the future, or receiving telepathic messages from someone in the future, or even dreaming about the future. Gradually, though, writers discarded these cumbersome plot devices and began writing stories that took place in the future from the get-go, with no attempt to connect them to the present day.

The future is now the default setting of the majority of science fiction stories, but at the time this was an innovation. So, too, was discarding the Gernsbackian notion that SF was meant to provide an easy-to-digest science education. The science fiction that started coming out of the thirties was more adventurous and less hidebound than most of that which had been published in the previous decade, and as more SF magazines began arriving on the scene, and new editors and yet more writers entered the field, the genre began a period of rapid growth.

SF stories were no longer dry pontifications on the marvels of radio or guided tours of lost continents. They took their readers on reckless jaunts across space and time, where starships moved faster than light, aliens came in all conceivable shapes, colors, and hat sizes, and time travelers cavorted with dinosaurs and Roman emperors alike. And the writing steadily got better. While still not very sophisticated, overwrought narratives were gradually replaced by a more direct and natural style.

In 1937, John W. Campbell, Jr., took over the editor's chair of *Astounding*. The following year, Raymond A. Palmer took charge of *Amazing*. But while Palmer took *Amazing* further down the path of swashbuckling, if improbable, adventure stories, Campbell decided that it was time the genre became more thoughtful and—dare we say it?—mature. Campbell's vision of science fiction was far different from where the genre had been only a decade earlier, and the latest generation of writers he brought into the field—Asimov, Heinlein, van Vogt, Sturgeon, and many others—were given the mandate to think more carefully about what they wrote and try to imagine realistic futures instead of merely grinding out stories about space battles and killer robots.

All this came without any influence from the Hollywood movie industry. The last major SF movies of the thirties were *Things to Come* and *Transatlantic Tunnel* before the musical comedy *Just Imagine* became a big, expensive bomb that, except for low-budget serials, killed SF movies until the 1950s. And although there was the rare mainstream bestseller like *Brave New World* or *When Worlds Collide*, science fiction remained, by and large, a province of pulp magazines. It was a long time before SF novels began to be regularly published in book form, and the mass-market paperbacks that would eventually kill the pulps were still many years away.

Science fiction was a genre that lifted itself up by its own bootstraps. It was an almost underground form of literature, dismissed by critics, ignored by academics, considered trash by parents and teachers. And yet it managed to survive by its own wits, generating writers, artists, and editors within a subculture that flew just beneath the radar.

What I find remarkable about the SF published in the thirties and forties is that it was written during some of the worst times in American history. The Great Depression, with its economic, social, and political upheavals, was soon followed by the horrors of the Second World War. Nothing was certain, and life was rather bleak for many people. Despite everything going on around them, though, SF writers persisted in imagining better worlds and better times. The collective message, intentional or otherwise, was one of hope. *We'll live through this and go to other worlds. Our world will become a better place than it is now. However lousy life may seem, however uneasy the times may be, don't worry . . . the future is going to be great!* This message may have been what gave science fiction its popularity: a sense of not just wonder, but also optimism. However evil Adolf Hitler might be, at least he wasn't Helmut of Boskone.

The first time I got a sense of science fiction's history was one of the first anthologies I ever read. When my sister Genevieve went off to college in the late sixties, she left behind a large shoebox full of SF paperbacks and magazines she'd read in high school. I was still in elementary school, but I was already reading science fiction by then, so this little cache was something of a gold mine. Among those paperbacks was *Award Science Fiction Reader*, edited by Alden H. Norton, a collection of classic stories by Clarke, Sturgeon, Simak, Anderson, van Vogt, Brackett, and Campbell. The introduction was by Sam Moskowitz, another member of that founding class of American science fiction fans and writers, and something he wrote has stuck with me ever since:

"It was time for science fiction to grow up. It had been stagnating in a story format which concepts alone could no longer carry and the older readers had outgrown the vicarious thrill of space battles and the blasting of alien monsters."

Moskowitz was speaking about 1941 and the beginnings of the Golden Age, but he wrote that in 1966, when the New Wave was gathering force in both Great Britain and America. I read this just as I was beginning to graduate from Winston juveniles to Ace Science Fiction Specials, and even to my adolescent eye it was obvious that SF

was in a state of constant development; I saw the evidence every time I went to a drugstore or supermarket and turned the spinner rack in search of another paperback I could buy for sixty cents. There was a vast difference between Heinlein's *Rocket Ship Galileo*—the first SF novel I ever read—and Michael Moorcock's *The Black Corridor*, which completely changed my conception of what a space novel could be.

So what does any of this have to do with the current state of science fiction? I may make some people angry when I say this, but Moskowitz's words are just as pertinent today as they were forty-seven years ago, because they address the present-day condition of the field. To paraphrase his introduction, science fiction needs to grow up . . . again.

Like many of you, I belong to an informal online list-group, a group of like-minded friends who chat with one another via email. I've met only two of these people in real life and the rest are relative strangers, but the group includes a space artist, a web designer, a Hollywood concept artist, a game designer, a legal assistant, and yours truly. What we share in common is an interest in science fiction, and among our favorite topics of discussion are recent SF movies.

This last summer, we talked a lot about that season's crop of films and how disappointed or even irritated we were in most of them. *Oblivion* was pretty but dumb, *After Earth* was bad beyond belief, *Star Trek Into Darkness* was a major letdown, *War World Z* was shunned, and *Pacific Rim* was great if you happen to like Godzilla movies (which most of us do). The only two movies we all enjoyed were *Elysium* and *Europa Report*, but I think the one we liked the most was a North Korean propaganda film on YouTube that showed the PRNK attacking the United States with stock footage of other countries' aircraft carriers, jets, and nuclear missiles.

Sometime during this email conversation, we came up with a list of the four biggest clichés in current SF movies, the things we hope to never see again but, unfortunately, probably will. In no particular order, they are:

- (1) alien invasions;
- (2) space battles;
- (3) dystopias;
- (4) guys in body armor running back and forth shooting at each other with big guns.

It was pretty amusing until it occurred to me that these clichés no longer belong only to SF movies. They now belong to SF novels as well . . . and if you don't agree with me, I ask you to visit a local bookstore and take a long, hard look at the science fiction section.

There's still a lot of good, original SF being published; authors like Kim Stanley Robinson, Robert J. Sawyer, Joe Haldeman, Nancy Kress, Alastair Reynolds, Maureen McHugh, and Jack McDevitt come to mind, among many others. However, it's become increasingly difficult to find them among the stacks of books about space marines fighting the Bad Guy Empire or people battling aliens amid the ruins of destroyed cities.

This is the new pulp fiction, but the difference between it and the stuff published during the thirties and forties is that what's coming out now are, by and large, repetitions of what's already been done. A bestselling alien-invasion novel generates ten more alien-invasion novels; a popular military space opera series is quickly followed by another one pretty much like it. Even the covers are repetitious. One of the major artists in the field recently told me that he's all but stopped doing dustjacket art because he's tired of being asked by art directors to paint covers that look just like ones that someone else did last month.

There're various reasons for this. The biggest factor is the conglomeration of the American publishing industry. Publishers that were once independent have been

merged with larger publishing companies, and they in turn have been swallowed by even larger companies. These super-publishers are chiefly interested in profits, the bigger the better. So a mentality has developed where novels are being judged more by their potential profitability than their literary merit, and anything that isn't gauged to be an immediate bestseller is forced into a midlist that's getting smaller all the time.

So editors are forced to insist that writers work within tried-and-true formulas that fit inside distinct, easily marketable subgenres. The result is that SF novels are often taking their cues from movies and computer games, because the perceived wisdom is that the millions of people who bought tickets for the latest Hollywood opus or PlayStation epic will buy books that promise a repetition of the same.

Fortunately, a handful of independent publishers are still willing to take chances with novels that don't follow the latest trend or demand that every book be a best-seller. It's become harder to find such novels, but the SF field has always been good at supporting both new writers and established authors . . . which is a major reason why the genre has survived for as long as it has.

There's also the continued existence of SF magazines and anthologies. In the U.S., there are now only three science fiction magazines—*Analog*, *Asimov's*, and *Fantasy & Science Fiction*—that regularly see print, a considerable decrease from the days of my youth when there were nearly a dozen. However, electronic publishing has allowed many new magazines to be produced—*Lightspeed*, *Clarkesworld*, *Subterranean*, *Galaxy's Edge*, and others—which collectively publish as much new fiction as their print cousins. And while the major publishers seldom produce original anthologies any more, the small press has picked up the slack by regularly publishing short story collections.

Short fiction remains the place where you're most likely to find original, thought-provoking SF that doesn't fall into convenient marketing categories. Short fiction doesn't make enough money for it to be written, edited, or published by anyone who doesn't sincerely love the stuff. This is why, in recent years, new ground is broken more often by magazines and anthologies than it is by novels; because there's not as much pressure to follow commercial trends, there's more freedom to experiment. It's also the reason why many authors, myself included, continue to write short fiction even though we could spend our time producing only novels.

Nonetheless, over the last decade or so there's been a growing sense of frustration within the SF field that's been shared by writers, editors, and readers alike, a feeling that we've entered the horse latitudes where no fair winds blow. I think there's something else going on besides the absorption of the publishing industry by Big Media. I suspect we've also become haunted by the times in which we live, and that has affected the way in which we perceive not only the present, but also our possible futures.

It's become a cliché to blame 9/11 for everything from the Iraq war to tooth decay, but I've come to believe that the terrorist attacks of that hideous day had a subtle influence on science fiction as well. Occurring when they did, just after the beginning of a new century, caused people to dread the future instead of embracing it . . . and when writers and readers alike turned to their favorite genre, it was for escapism, not solutions.

I don't think it's a coincidence that fantasy leaped ahead of science fiction in popularity during this time. I don't have a problem with fantasy, but the fact remains that it doesn't confront reality the way SF does. On the other hand, I can't blame readers for preferring fantasy to science fiction. Over the last decade or so, the prevalent mood of the average science fiction novel has become that of despair. In SF, the future has become bleak and rather ugly, with dystopian societies so commonplace that they're no

longer unique or even scary; for the most part, they're now just backdrops for firefights.

When America reacted to 9/11 by launching a pointless invasion of Iraq while searching every little old lady who gets on an airliner, science fiction responded by becoming paranoid and militaristic as well. It's now become difficult to find an SF novel that doesn't have mass conflict as its focal point, or depict extraterrestrials as being anything but monsters bent on rubbing out humans.

The Singularity Theory has often been pegged as a major reason why SF writers are now reluctant to project an optimistic outcome for human history. However, Vernor Vinge himself has pointed out that the Singularity is only a theory, not an inevitable forecast . . . and I might add that it's not even a theory, strictly speaking, but rather a hypothesis. A theory is something that can be tested, and we won't know what will or will not happen after the Singularity until it actually occurs . . . if it ever does.

Global warming has become another elephant in the room. Science fiction's response has been to portray the most dire consequences—rising sea levels inundating coastal cities, the depletion of fossil fuels, the emergence of dictatorial societies of haves and have-nots—without searching for any solutions . . . or at least none that don't come from a gun barrel.

The result of science fiction's current inclination toward grim futures is that readers are losing interest in the genre, but the consequences may go beyond diminished sales figures. One of the interesting things about SF is its subtle influence on real-life events, both social and technological. It's been well established that science fiction has inspired space exploration, robotics, and the digital revolution. It's also possible that it may have helped avert global nuclear war by depicting, again and again, the horrible outcome of such a conflict. SF doesn't exist in isolation. It's part of a cultural feedback loop; it not only takes its cues from present-day events, but feeds into them as well. Yet we can't just take credit for positive contributions and ignore the negatives. If we continue to portray the future as being nothing but a dark and dangerous place . . . that may well be what we'll get. If we continually tell readers that science and technology will betray us, who will continue to believe in their potential for positive change?

One of the principal ways in which SF evolved during the twentieth century was the growing awareness among writers that what they were doing wasn't telling stories *about* the future so much as they were telling stories set *in* the future. There's a subtle yet distinct difference. Science fiction does not, and cannot, predict the future; attempts to do so usually end in erroneous predictions, not to mention really boring stories. What SF does, really, is weave a sort of mythology, one based on science and technology—and to some degree sociology, psychology, and history as well—instead of legend, magic, and superstition. I may write a story set on Mars, for instance, not because I believe that this is what will or even could happen, but because I want to tell what my friend and colleague John Crowley calls "a parable of the future" . . . a story whose outcome sheds some light on a point I'd like to make about the exploration of Mars, or perhaps a story about the human condition that just happens to be set on Mars. Kind of a futuristic myth, or even a "scientific fantasy" (to use one of the genre's oldest names), but certainly not a prediction.

So it behooves us to be careful about the kinds of myths we want to create. If we're playing with possibilities—thought experiments, if you will—then we ought to be telling stories with positive outcomes as well as negative ones. If SF is going to survive and even thrive in the twenty-first century, we've got to learn how to tell better parables. I'm not advocating Pollyannaish avoidance of reality, where we pretend that tomorrow's world will be a squeaky-clean utopia where no one will have any problems. On the other hand, writers must once again address the future in a way that doesn't automatically assume that we face nothing but dark times ahead.

Science and technology are rapidly opening new frontiers that are only barely being touched upon by science fiction. In my particular area of interest, space exploration, we're discovering that the galaxy is a much different place than was imagined only a few years ago, with new planets in other star systems that are stranger than anything previously thought possible. At the same time, a new space race is underway, with private companies on the verge of assuming NASA's former role in sending people into space. And in the past few years, I've attended conferences in which interstellar travel has been solemnly discussed by high-level scientists and futurists, not as something that might happen in the far future but perhaps even within the next hundred years.

SF used to be very good at depicting space exploration. Now only a handful of established authors do so, and new writers are discouraged from tackling this particular subject. Yet there's an audience for these novels. I know a writer who tried to sell a novel about near-future space exploration after successfully publishing three post-apocalypse books. When his editor rejected it on the grounds that she only wanted to see a fourth book in the trilogy, he published it himself on Amazon . . . and sold as many copies as he did of his post-apocalypse novels.

I don't think science fiction is dying—I've been hearing that dire prediction for as long as I've been actively involved in the field—or that it's run out of ideas and exhausted its potential. But writers need to rediscover the sense of adventure—and, yes, the sense of wonder—that made SF so attractive in the first place. We must stop being afraid of what might happen tomorrow. It's entirely possible that the future may not suck. It's okay to write as if it won't.

Editors must be willing to take chances with novels that don't fall into convenient marketing categories, but electronic publishing has also given writers the ways and means of getting their books to readers. If self-published ebooks are going to be a viable alternative to Big Media, though, I think it's important that authors who take this path don't simply imitate the paperback bestsellers that are already out there. Most readers don't want the same thing over and over again, and Amazon is already swamped with enough military space-op to gag a brigade. What we need is the next Roger Zelazny, the next Cordwainer Smith, the next Leigh Brackett, the next James Tiptree, Jr., the next Frederik Pohl.

SF readers and fans have supported the genre for generations, keeping the field alive through hard times, and I hope they continue to do so. More than once, I've had friends who are writers but aren't in the SF field express envy over the fact that science fiction has an organized social network; they seldom get to meet their readers except at bookstore signings. Yet I think fans can hinder the field when they're unwilling to accept novels and stories that aren't what they're already used to seeing, or take issue with material that doesn't live up to preconceived expectations. It's a conservatism that doesn't suit the field, and sometimes can be embarrassing. One of the most amusing items I've found in the pulps was a letter published in an issue of *Planet Stories* where a reader complained about a new writer's overly literary approach to science fiction, and how this fan just wanted good, old-fashioned space opera that didn't demand too much from him. The writer he was complaining about was Ray Bradbury.

Perhaps the most intriguing thing I've learned from studying the history of SF is how the genre periodically renews itself. It did so in the late thirties and forties, and again during the late sixties and early seventies, and yet again in the mid-eighties through the early nineties. If history is cyclical, then the SF field is due for another period of reinvention.

The stage is set, the actors are in place. The time has come for the curtain to rise on twenty-first century science fiction.