



THE SEVEN BEAUTIES
of SCIENCE FICTION

ISTVAN CSICSERY-RONAY JR.

The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction



THE
SEVEN BEAUTIES
◦ ◦ ◦ OF ◦ ◦ ◦
SCIENCE FICTION
◦ ◦ ◦ ◦ ◦ ◦ ◦

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.

◦
WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY PRESS
Middletown, Connecticut

For ETTI & SACHA

Amor est plusquam cognitiva quam cognitio.

○

Published by
WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY PRESS
Middletown, CT 06459
www.wesleyan.edu/wespress

Copyright © 2008
by Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.
All rights reserved
First Wesleyan paperback 2011

Printed in United States of America 5 4 3 2 1
ISBN for the paperback edition: 978-0-8195-7092-5

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Csicsery-Ronay, Istvan, Jr.
The seven beauties of science fiction /
Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8195-6889-2 (cloth: alk. paper)

1. Science fiction—History and criticism.
2. Science fiction—Philosophy. I. Title.

PN3433.5.C75 2008
809.3'8762—dc22 2008029054

Wesleyan University Press is a member of the
Green Press Initiative. The paper used in this book meets
their minimum requirement for recycled paper.

CONTENTS

Preface ix

INTRODUCTION

Science Fiction and This Moment 1

FIRST BEAUTY

Fictive Neology 13

SECOND BEAUTY

Fictive Novums 47

THIRD BEAUTY

Future History 76

FOURTH BEAUTY

Imaginary Science 111

FIFTH BEAUTY

The Science-Fictional Sublime 146

SIXTH BEAUTY

The Science-Fictional Grotesque 182

SEVENTH BEAUTY

The *Technologiade* 216

CONCLUDING UNSCIENTIFIC POSTSCRIPT

The Singularity and Beyond 262

Notes 267

Bibliography 295

Index 317

PREFACE

*I wanted to have a bird's eye view;
I ended up in outer space.*



This book began with a pedagogical purpose. I had hoped to map out some ideas about the historical and philosophical aspects of science fiction (sf), and through these ideas to outline the concepts I felt were most useful for studying sf as a distinctive genre. I had hoped to do it in language that would be accessible not only to specialists, but to readers outside the academy as well. In time I understood that I was also writing it for my own small, dispersed community of literary comparatists. The great literary theorists of the twentieth century from whom I learned the most — Georg Lukács, Erich Auerbach, M. M. Bakhtin, Northrop Frye, and Edward Said — had little or nothing to say about the genre to which I had devoted most of my professional life. Thus I aspired to establish a place for sf in the historical continuum of literature and art. Consequently, my approach is somewhat Old School. In the constantly accelerating transformations of our technoscientific culture, many of my vehicles are probably already receding in the rearview mirror. Consider *Seven Beauties* then a work of steampunk criticism. I have not tried to be systematic or complete. Neither have I tried to debate, or to anticipate criticism. The main purpose of this book is to inspire better ones, not to have the last word.

My greatest challenge has been to design arguments that will account for both refined artistic examples of sf and the popular commodity forms of “sci-fi.” Theories concerned with the former tend to treat popular forms with contempt. Populist theories tend to ignore or discount the most artistically and intellectually interesting works: sf’s contributions to elite culture. I have tried to formulate categories that will account for sf in all its manifestations. My goal is to understand *science fictionality* as a way of thinking about the world, made concrete in many different media and styles, rather than as a particular market niche or genre category. This book is only the first step in that project, which still requires close study of sf in film, televi-

sion, visual art, music, and new digital media. Although the Seven Beauties appear in many different forms, they are attractors of all forms of science fiction.

My title alludes to a revered medieval Persian poem. The *Haft Paykar* (Seven beauties), a mystical epic by the twelfth-century Azeri poet, Nizami, tells of the legendary King Bahram Gur's discovery of a secret room in his palace, in which he finds the portraits of seven beautiful princesses. He falls in love with each of them, sets out to find them in the seven main regions of the known earth, marries them, and builds a palace with seven domes for them, ensconcing each in her own hall. Each of the princesses represents a different cosmic principle. He visits each of them for a night, during which they tell him a rich allegorical tale of mystical love and moral enlightenment.

So is my title meant to evoke the image of a fantastic edifice with seven halls. Each is rich and intriguing in its own right, and each contains the others. I am not entirely sure how my "beauties" should be understood in rationalistic terms. They are perhaps *cognitive attractions*, intellectual gravitational fields that draw our attention. They are perhaps *mental schemes*, through which we organize our thinking. They are perhaps *tools for thought*, so well made that we admire their design at the very moment we are using them. Whatever else they are, they compose a constellation of thoughts that sf helps us to become conscious of. Some readers will find seven an arbitrary number; others, a full set.

This book emerged out of dialogues with hundreds of students and most especially with colleagues and friends, who alerted me again and again that science fiction is more than a literary genre or a social passion. It is a way of organizing the mind to include the contemporary world. There is much to criticize in a genre that is dominated by entertainment industries and popular tastes. But there is also much to care about. SF is an art that delights in vision, intelligence, and the infinite possibilities of change. It calls into question all verities, except curiosity and play.

○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

Many friends and colleagues inspired and supported this work. I thank especially David Porush, Katherine Hayles, Scott Bukatman, Brooks Landon, David Seed, Robert Philmus, and my colleagues in the English department of DePauw University. My coeditors at *Science Fiction Studies*—Arthur Evans, Joan Gordon, Veronica Hollinger, Rob Latham, and Carol McGuirk—taught me that sf is not only an object of study, but an occasion for love, care, and inspiration. Most of all, I am grateful to my wife, Etti, and my son, Sacha, for understanding what this book was truly all about.

I also thank DePauw University and the National Endowment for the Humanities for fellowships to pursue this work. The chapter “Fifth Beauty” was originally published in somewhat different form in *Science Fiction Studies* 29, no. 3 (March 2002); a shorter version of the chapter “Sixth Beauty” appeared in *métal et chair/flesh and metal* 4 (February 2002).

INTRODUCTION

Science Fiction and This Moment



*“These are the days of lasers in the jungle.”*¹ SF has emerged as a pervasive genre of literature — and of film, video, comics, computer graphics and games — in the postindustrial North. Indeed, it elicits intense interest in the rest of the world. It is not so much that sf has grown into this position, as the reverse: the world has grown into sf. Gertrude Stein once pronounced the United States the oldest country on earth, because it was the first to enter the twentieth century. By the same token, sf is one of the most venerable of living genres: it was the first to devote its imagination to the future and to the ceaseless revolutions of knowledge and desire that attend the application of scientific and technical knowledge to social life.

From its roots, whether we trace them to Lucian, Swift, Voltaire, Mary Shelley, or Hugo Gernsback, sf has been a genre of fantastic entertainment. It has produced many works of intellectual and political sophistication, side by side with countless ephemeral confections. Unlike most popular genres, it has also been critically self-aware. The fiction has inspired a steady production of commentary about what distinguishes it from other modes of expression. This body of critical work is rich in social diversity, and unparalleled in its allegiance to reimagining the world with a passion that has at times resembled the commitment to a political movement.²

The once-regnant view that sf can’t help but be vulgar and artistically shallow is fading. As the world undergoes daily transformations via the development of technoscience in every imaginable aspect of life, (and, more important, as people become aware of these transformations) sf has come to be seen as an essential mode of imagining the horizons of possibility. However much sf texts vary in artistic quality, intellectual sophistication, and their capacity to give pleasure, they share a mass social energy, a desire to imagine a collective future for the human species and the world.

In the past forty years, not only have sf artists produced more artistically ambitious works than in the previous hundred, but works of criticism have

established the foundations for definition and self-examination characteristic of mature artistic movements. Major critical works — from Darko Suvin's *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979) to Scott Bukatman's *Terminal Identity* (1993), journals of academic scholarship and criticism (*Foundation*, *Extrapolation*, *Science Fiction Studies*, *The New York Review of Science Fiction*), and the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction's* second edition, which gave the first comprehensive overview of the history of the genre for scholars — have provided tools for thinking about the genre and its implications in sophisticated philosophical and historical terms.

At this moment, a strikingly high proportion of films, commercial art, popular music, video and computer games, and nongenre fiction are overtly sf or contain elements of it. This widespread normalization of what is essentially a style of estrangement and dislocation has stimulated the development of science-fictional habits of mind, so that we no longer treat sf as purely a genre-engine producing formulaic effects, but rather as a kind of awareness we might call *science-fictionality*, a mode of response that frames and tests experiences as if they were aspects of a work of science fiction. It is one mode of response among many others, and it influences people's actions to different degrees. Some are inspired to create, as H. G. Wells's novel *The World Set Free* inspired Leo Szilárd to imagine nuclear fission,³ or as William Gibson's depiction of the cyberspace matrix and virtual reality in *Neuromancer* stimulated countless computer programmers.⁴ Some are drawn, in games and in life, to playing out roles they identify with in sf texts. Most people merely bracket difficult-to-process, incongruous moments of technology's intersection with everyday life as science-fictional moments.

Increasingly, this sense of technosocial aspiration meshing with the limits and desires of concrete social life, often involving violent collisions of hard techniques with human and natural complexity, is the appropriate response to contemporary reality. Consider the daily news: the postmodern hecatomb of the World Trade Center; Chernobyl's lost villages and mutant flora; CGI pop stars; genocide under surveillance satellites; the cloning of farm animals; Internet pornography raining down in microwaves; helicopter gunships deployed against stone-throwing crowds; GM pollen drifting toward the calyces of natural plants; Artificial Life; global social movements (and even nations) without territories; the ability to alter one's physical gender; the evaporation of the North Pole. It is sf that has most assiduously imagined and explored such collisions and transitions. It is from sf's thesaurus of images that we draw many of our metaphors and models for understanding our technologized world, and it is as sf that many of our impressions of technology-aided desire and technology-riven anxiety are processed back into works of the imagina-

tion. It is impossible to map the extent to which the perception of contemporary reality requires and encourages science-fictional orientations.

The Gaps of Science Fiction

The genre of sf has been notoriously difficult to define; how much more so a mode of thought like science-fictionality, which is neither a belief nor a model, but rather a mood or attitude, a way of entertaining incongruous experiences, in which judgment is suspended, as if we were witnessing the transformations happening to, and occurring in, us. Nonetheless, let us make a tentative approach. The attitude of science-fictionality is characterized by two linked forms of hesitation, a pair of gaps. One gap extends between the belief that certain ideas and images of technoscientific transformations of the world can be entertained, and the rational recognition that they may be *realized*, with ramifications for social life. This gap lies between the conceivability of future transformations and the possibility of their actualization. The other gap lies between belief in the immanent possibility (perhaps even the inexorability) of those transformations, and reflection about their possible ethical, social, and spiritual consequences. This gap stretches between conceiving of the plausibility of historically unforeseeable innovations in human experience (*novums*)⁵ and their broader ethical and social-cultural implications and resonances. SF thus involves two forms of hesitation: a historical-logical one (how plausible is the conceivable novum?) and an ethical one (how good/bad/altogether alien are the transformations that would issue from the novum?). These gaps compose the black box in which technoscientific conceptions, ostensibly unmediated by social and ethical contingencies, are transformed into a rational recognition of their possible realization and implications. The resulting fictions may be credible projections of present trends or fantastic images of imagined impossibilities. Usually, they are amalgams of both.

SF embeds scientific-technical concepts in the broad sphere of human interests and actions, explaining them, mythologizing them, and explicitly attributing social value to them. This embedding may take many literary forms, from the exhumation of dead mythologies, pseudomimetic extrapolation, and satirical subversion, to utopian transformation and secularized apocalypse. It is an inherently, and radically, future-oriented process. Imaginary worlds of sf are pretended resolutions of dilemmas insoluble and often barely perceived in the present. The exact ontological status of sf worlds is suspended in anticipation. Unlike historical fiction (of which sf is a direct heir), where a less intense suspense operates because the outcome of the past is still in the process of being completed in the present's partisan conflicts, sf is suspended because all

the relevant information about the future is never available. Because future developments influence revisions of the past, sf's black box also involves the past, in the hesitation that comes in anticipating the complete revision of origins. A past that is not yet known is a form of the future. So too is a present unanticipated by the past. Further, because sf is concerned mainly with the role of science and technology in defining human cultural value, there can be as many kinds of sf as there are theories of technoscientific culture. This conception of sf concerns not just the actual historical production of the commercial genre known as Science Fiction, but the range of possible science fictions, many of which have not been realized.

This range is why sf is not a genre of aesthetic entertainment only, but a complex hesitation about the relationship between imaginary conceptions and historical reality unfolding into the future. SF orients itself within a concept of history that holds that science and technology actively participate in the creation of reality, implanting human uncertainty into the natural/nonhuman world. At the same time, sf's hesitations also involve a sense of fatality about instrumental rationality's power to transform or to undermine the conditions of thought that gave rise to it. The same freedom that detaches nature from a mythology of natural necessity restores that fatality, ironically, in the irrepressible drive of human beings to transform nature continually and without transcendental limits.

SF has become a form of discourse that directly engages contemporary language and culture, and that has, in this moment, a generic interest in the intersections of technology, scientific theory, and social practice. Since the late 1960s, when it became the chosen vehicle for both technocratic and critical utopian writing, sf has experienced a steady growth in popularity, critical interest, and theoretical sophistication. It reflects and engages the technological culture that pervades modernized cultures. The irresistible expansion of communications technologies has drawn the traditional spheres of power into an ever-tightening web of instrumental rationalization. Simultaneously, the culture of information has rewritten the notions of nature and transcendence that have dominated Western societies for the past few centuries, replacing them with an as yet inchoate worldview of *artificial immanence*, in which every value that previous cultures considered transcendental or naturally given is at least theoretically capable of artificial replication or simulation, and eventual transmutation. In this sense, sf has established its own domain, linking literary, philosophical, and scientific imaginations, and subverting the cultural boundaries between them. In its narratives it produces and hyperbolizes the new sense of immanence. SF regularly employs radically new scientific concepts of material and social relations; these relations, in turn, influence our

conceptions of what is imaginable or plausible. Indeed, sf is ingrained within the quotidian consciousness of people living in the postindustrial world; each day they witness the transformations of their values and material conditions in the wake of technical acceleration beyond their conceptual threshold.

So it is that, encountering problems issuing from the social implications of science, and viewing dramatic technohistorical scenes in real life, we displace them into a virtual imaginary space, an alternate present or future that we can reflect on, where we can test our delight, anxiety, or grief, or simply play, without having to renounce our momentary sense of identity, social place, and the world. We transform our experience into sf, if only for a moment.

The Seven Beauties

I believe that sf can be treated as a particular, recognizable mode of thought and art. But rather than a programlike set of exclusive rules and required devices, this mode is a constellation of diverse intellectual and emotional interests and responses that are particularly active in an age of restless technological transformation. I consider seven such categories to be the most attractive and formative of science-fictionality. These are the “seven beauties” of my title: *fictive neology*, *fictive novums*, *future history*, *imaginary science*, *the science-fictional sublime*, *the science-fictional grotesque*, and the *Technologiade*. Each is an aspect of sf that audiences desire from the genre.

1. *Fictive neology*. Readers of sf expect to encounter new words and other signs that indicate worlds changed from their own, just as viewers of visual sf expect special visual effects, and listeners expect special sonic effects representing new sense-perceptions and aesthetic designs. Our culture treats sf as the primary source for such symbolic indications of radical newness. The fictive neologies of sf are variations and combinations based on the actual process of lexicogenesis experienced in social life. They can appear in a great variety of forms, in diverse registers, from the prophetic to the comic. In every case, they imply linguistic-symbolic models of technological transformation, playfully suspended and seriously displaced. They engage audiences to use them as clues and triggers to construct the logic of science-fictional worlds.
2. *Fictive novums*. Similarly, sf is expected to provide imaginary models of radical transformations of human history initiated by fictive *novums*. The concept of the novum, introduced in sf studies by Darko Suvin, refers to a historically unprecedented and unpredicted “new thing” that intervenes in the routine course of social life and changes the

trajectory of history. The novum is usually a rationally explicable material phenomenon, the result of an invention or discovery, whose unexpected appearance elicits a wholesale change in the perception of reality. The very concept of history requires the notion of innovation to distinguish it from myth. Every sf text supplies fictive novums and responses to them, and thus engages the sense of real inhabitants of technorevolutionary societies that they are bombarded with real-world novums to an unprecedented degree.

3. *Future history.* Although sf need not always be set in the future, the genre is inherently future-oriented. The discovery of an alternative history, a parallel universe, or a concealed past changes the horizon of the future and the meaning of human history just as much as does an explicitly futuristic setting. SF audiences expect the genre to provide futures that are relevant to their own times. The genre consequently relies on the techniques of realism: not only the detailed decor of circumstantial realism, but cause-and-effect logic, commonsense motivation, and familiar perceptions of the object world that are the characteristic qualities of naturalistic narrative. By maintaining a sense of the integral connection between the present and the future, sf constructs micromyths of the historical process, establishing the audience's present as the future-oriented "prehistory of the future." SF is treated as the culture's main repository and generator of imaginable (albeit often extravagantly playful) future horizons.
4. *Imaginary science.* SF is the main artistic means for introducing technoscientific ideas and events among the value-bearing stories and metaphors of social life. And yet, precisely because a gap exists between the fundamentally rationalistic, logocentric universe of scientific discourse and the diffuse culture of social myths and alternative rationalities, sf texts are expected to involve playful deviations from known scientific thought. The scientific content of sf, even though generally based on the scientifically plausible knowledge of its day, is always fabulous. SF's science is transformed to fit the parameters of cultural myth and aesthetic play. In sf we "take some persistent fiction in contemporary human life, and we turn it into science."⁶ We make science of our metaphors.
5. *Science-fictional sublime.* Of all contemporary genres, sf is the one most expected to evoke the experience of the sublime. The subject matter of sf necessarily involves the elements of the classical Kantian sublime: the sense of temporal and spatial infinitude of the *mathematical*, and the sense of overwhelming physical power of the *dynamic sub-*

lime. Beyond this, it also invokes the historical mutation that David E. Nye has named the *American technological sublime*: the sense of access to, and control of, the powers of nature that typified the American populace's responses to the monumental engineering projects of the nineteenth century.⁷ The sense of the sublime most characteristic of post–World War II sf is the *technoscientific sublime*, which entails a sense of awe and dread in response to human technological projects that exceed the power of their human creators.

6. *Science-fictional grotesque*. The technoscientific grotesque is the inversion, and frequent concomitant, of the technosublime. It represents the collapse of ontological categories that reason has considered essentially distinct, creating a spectacle of impossible fusions. This is the domain of monstrous aliens, interstitial beings, and anomalous physical phenomena. Where the technosublime is extensive, inducing sentiments of awe and dread in response to phenomena either created or revealed by human techniques, the grotesque is implosive, accompanied by fascination and horror at the prospect of intimate category-violating phenomena discovered by human science. Because technoscience is the guardian of the rational categorization of matter, the grotesque attacks the very rationality that made its apprehension possible. This facet, one of the most powerfully attractive of the genre, draws its reason-based irrationality increasingly from actual scientific innovations that combine phenomena previously held to be naturally distinct (such as, for example, genetic engineering, molecular computing, and Artificial Life) and the constant weakening of category boundaries that seems to menace the sense of personal identity.
7. *The Technologiade*. Although sf does not generate story-structures of its own, it transforms popular cultural materials by reorienting their concerns toward its characteristic horizon: the transformation of human societies as a result of innovations attending technoscientific projects. Audiences expect sf (a) to tell stories that will make sense of their contemporary historical experiences of technomodernization, and (b) ultimately to moralize them by drawing them back into the axiological structures of their familiar cultures or subcultures. These miniature myth-structures simultaneously dislocate the audience's orientation toward its familiar reality, and link the fictive predicament — radically new in its objective conditions — to conventional story-structures that recontain the radical newness. They act as historically ambivalent and complex fables of technohistory.

Although any story-form can be adapted to science-fictional uses, certain literary tale-structures are especially favored by the genre: the space opera, the modern adventure tale, the Gothic, and the utopia. These tale-forms reveal a profound kinship; each gives shape to certain historical and philosophical attitudes toward human control over nature. Each kind of tale has a distinct genealogy of its own, and each produces a rich variety of ironic inversions and formal deformations. To sf, they have offered established narrative forms for articulating dramatic relationship between technology and social life. In sf their shared qualities converge.

The narratives of the modern adventure cluster were closely allied with the popular discourse of colonial expansion and imperialism, a discourse they drew from and influenced in their turn. SF's characteristic mutations of the adventure forms reflect the discourse of a transnational global regime of technoscientific rationalization that followed the collapse of the European imperialist project. SF narrative accordingly has become the leading mediating institution for the utopian construction of technoscientific Empire. And for resistance to it.

The Seven Beauties are not classically aesthetic qualities that inspire contemplation and admiration for their harmony and balance. They are not pure. They are riven, indecisive, chaotic, sometimes corrupt, always ludic. They are beauties of a mind incapable of making itself up. Although their themes are the central ones of our age — the relationships between knowledge and ethics, technology and identity, material reality and the imagination — very few sf writers have taxed their spirits to create arresting, self-risking fables for their worlds. SF is primarily an art of the marketplace, willing to fold sublime moments into cheap, received formulas that are proven sellers. SF almost always asks its readers to be both more expansive and more limited than they already are. As its name implies, science fiction is an oxymoron. It invokes and delivers dichotomies, insoluble dilemmas, deceptive solutions. It makes manifest worlds upon worlds that are too contradictory to exist.

Within sf's generic universe of discourse, each of the beauties implies all the others. New signs signify new things. New things change the direction of history, and lead to new science. New discoveries and inventions inspire sublime and grotesque responses. And all these movements coalesce in fables of imaginary resolution. The sequence and hierarchy of these domains may be imagined in any order. New technoscience may invent new things, which require new names, and initiate new historical conditions. New things and the transformed knowledge that attends them require new perceptions and world-hypotheses; these perceptions may be sublime or grotesque, or each in turn. Finally, these moves must be comprehended, and narrated, intelligibly,

without violating their energy. Many of the most memorable works of the genre display all these qualities working in impressive balance. But not all sf manifests all of them to the same degree. It is doubtless my literary bias to believe it is much more common for all the beauties to complement one another in literary sf than in film or other spectacular forms. Indeed, the power of visual representations of the sublime and the grotesque, and of neological objects, is so great that it can easily eclipse matters that demand intellectual reflection, such as fictive history and imaginary science.

Individual texts and styles can be distinguished by the beauties they emphasize and underplay, especially in the interesting borderlands of the genre. The works of J. G. Ballard and David Cronenberg, for example, eschew fictive neology, history, and science, while emphasizing the novum, the grotesque, and the sublime. In Kim Stanley Robinson's work, fictive history and science play central roles, while neology and the technoscientific sublime and grotesque play minor ones. Beyond the genre, narrowly defined, sf-inflected texts may be characterized by any combination. In life, the social experiences upon which these matters are based tend to be articulated, and to emerge into awareness, discreetly. It is one of the cultural tasks of sf to draw them into an aesthetic constellation. This is also its primary pleasure.

On Method

This book is not intended to be a systematic exposition of a theory of sf, even less a history. I have been able to work outside a specific theoretical model of criticism mainly because important work has already been done to establish a rich critical discourse about the genre. Darko Suvin, Fredric Jameson, Peter Fitting, Marc Angenot, and Carl Freedman, among others have established a major body of Marxist sf criticism connecting sf with ideology-critique and utopian theory. Samuel R. Delany and Damien Broderick have written fundamental texts for semiological and postmodernist approaches. Joanna Russ, Veronica Hollinger, Jenny Wolmark, Brian Attebery, Wendy Pearson, and others have constructed a formidable apparatus for feminist and queer sf criticism; DeWitt Douglas Kilgore, Daniel Bernardi, Greg Tate, and Kodwe Eshun have done the same for Afrofuturism. Mark Rose's study of the genre in terms of archetypes and romance, *Alien Encounters*; Carl Malmgren's structuralist criticism, *Worlds Apart*; and Gary K. Wolfe's study of sf's iconography, *The Known and the Unknown*, have established terms for studying the genre's narrative psychology. Scott Bukatman's, Vivian Sobchack's and Brooks Landon's work on sf film has established the lines of a rich and varied scholarship about sf in spectacular media. And many of the most original categories have ap-

peared in the critical reviews of Gary Wolfe and John Clute, and the meditations of writer-theorists, such as Stanisław Lem, Joanna Russ, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Bruce Sterling.⁸

In this book, I shall approach sf on the one hand as a product of the convergence of social-historical forces that has led to the current global hegemony of technoscience, and consequently as an institution of ideological expression; on the other, as a ludic framework, a wide-ranging culture of game and play, in which that hegemony is entertained, absorbed, and resisted. SF is both an institution of mediation for a real historical moment, and also a free space for deconstructing those values. As a free space, it invites many different constituencies with varied interests, and inspires a great variety of styles. It imagines a universe of discourse held together by its constantly expanding megatext of neologies, speculations, and counterfactuals. In this book, I have tried to accommodate this identity and variety through a method of constellation, by linking and meditating on ideas from different disciplines and national traditions, without attempting to define a single underlying mechanism of production. I hope that most readers will take *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* as I intended it: a map of suggestions, made necessarily from a great distance, of possible paths that are still open to travel.

Texts and Media

Sf criticism and ancillary sf culture has reached a point where they have many film and literary texts that they consider canonical, either for the genre as a whole or for a particular current of culture and theory. As a result, much has been written about certain texts, styles, artists, and themes—*Alien*, *Blade Runner*, *Star Trek*, *Neuromancer*, *Solaris*, H. G. Wells, Jules Verne, Philip K. Dick, Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler, cyberpunk, anime, race, and gender, for example—while very little, indeed in some cases nothing, has been published on other important works and writers. I have had to decide whether to remain with texts that are familiar to most readers of sf, or to address other texts that deserve a wider audience. The first approach could easily lead to banality; the second, to obscurity. I had hoped originally to create a balance, but I now know that it is most difficult to make unfamiliar theoretical claims using unfamiliar texts as illustrative supports. So I too shall gather the usual suspects, and many of the discussions will revisit works that are justifiably regarded as canonical.

This dilemma I felt especially with regard to non-Anglo-Saxon sf. Very rarely have sf works produced in languages other than English attained popularity among the global sf audience, and received proper critical commentary.

For every such work as the Strugatsky brothers' *Roadside Picnic*, Stanisław Lem's *Solaris*, and Mamoru Oshii's *The Ghost in the Shell*, there are dozens, if not hundreds, of non-Anglo works of sf that deserve attention — both for their intrinsic merits, and as examples of national styles that could modify our dominant views about the genre. And yet, in this respect as well I have chosen to emphasize the familiar over the unfamiliar, and consequently the Anglo-Saxon tradition over others. SF is undeniably a predominantly Anglo-American genre, and its current influence reflects the cultural power of U.S. hyper-modernism and the technoscientific ideology that undergirds its cultural hegemony. Other national traditions of scientific fantasy have existed parallel to the Anglo-Saxon mainline, and they should be included in an overview of the genre, not as evolutionary exceptions or atavisms, but as legitimate cultural expressions and, indeed, as possible alternate lines along which the genre may develop in the future. However, that must wait for another book.

Finally, a study of science-fictionality should not restrict itself to one medium only. Most sf criticism has emphasized written sf. This emphasis is understandable; until recently the most significant works of the genre were in literary form, and the critical apparatus for studying literature has been refined over centuries. Nonetheless, it is clear that the same critical approaches cannot be used unreflectively to study other media, such as film. The technical ways with which film conveys its meanings, and the cognitive and aesthetic engagements that inexorably attend cinematic perception, require that sf theory accommodate sf film's overwhelming emphasis on perception at the expense of reflection. Such accommodation is vital, considering the increasing weight of sf film and television in establishing the dominant cultural conceptions of what sf is.⁹ And this re-visioning will certainly hold true for computer games, as well. Although that medium is only emerging, and there has been as yet little reflection on the aesthetic and cognitive aspects of constructing sf in it, it is abundantly clear that the genre is a privileged source of its narratives and effects. Computer games are already having a profound influence on the ideas of literary and cinematic sf artists, and computer-generated sf film associated with game design and aesthetics will certainly become a major art form in the near future.

Perhaps the most orphaned of all sf media is music. Little has appeared in print discussing the relationship between music and sf, a connection that is much richer than may at first appear. Rock and electronic music, film soundtracks, even operas have established a vocabulary of sounds that establish a range of conventional — and sometimes innovative — emotional responses characteristic of sf *sensations* parallel to the explicitly narrative and spectacular media. Music is central to digital culture. New interpretations of its history,

- [**Polysemy: Flexible Patterns of Meaning in Mind and Language \(Trends in Linguistics: Studies and Monographs, Volume 142\) pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub, doc, mobi**](#)
- [Discovering Orson Welles pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub, doc, mobi](#)
- [Jewish Meditation: A Practical Guide pdf](#)
- [click Let's Get Free: A Hip-Hop Theory of Justice pdf](#)
- [**You Don't Have to Be Evil to Work Here, But it Helps \(J.W. Wells and Co. Series, Book 4\) here**](#)

- <http://musor.ruspb.info/?library/How-Products-Are-Made--An-Illustrated-Guide-to-Product-Manufacturing--Volume-2.pdf>
- <http://monkeybubblemedia.com/lib/Discovering-Orson-Welles.pdf>
- <http://ramazotti.ru/library/Jewish-Meditation--A-Practical-Guide.pdf>
- <http://dadhoc.com/lib/Let-s-Get-Free--A-Hip-Hop-Theory-of-Justice.pdf>
- <http://growingsomeroots.com/ebooks/The-Man-Who-Travelled-on-Motorways.pdf>