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The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction

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IT IS WIDELY ACCEPTED TODAY THAT, WHENEVER WE RECEIVE OR PRODUCE CULTURE, WE DO SO FROM A CERTAIN POSITION AND that such location influences how we theorize about and read the world. Because I am an Italian trained in the United States (specializing in American modernism) in the 1980s, my reading of science fiction has been shaped by my cultural and biographical circumstances as well as by my geography. It is a hybrid approach, combining these circumstances primarily with an interest in feminist theory and in writing by women. From the very beginning I have foregrounded issues of genre writing as they intersect with gender and the deconstruction of high and low culture. Such an approach, however, must also come to terms with the political and cultural circumstances that characterize this turn of the century.

I consider myself a “child of conflict,” to borrow the words the Eku-menical Envoy uses to describe the Terran Observer Suttu in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Telling* (26). Born in 1960, I have no direct recollection of 1968; rather, I belong to the generation of the 1970s, which like the rest of Italy was marked by the “years of lead” (*anni di piombo*) of terrorism—the attacks by the Red Brigades that between 1976 and 1980 killed almost a hundred people as well as the bombings by extreme-right terrorists together with state apparatuses that, from 1969 on, killed many more people. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the recent production of dystopian science fiction speaks to me more than do the utopias of the 1960s and early 1970s. And, to a certain extent, the years of lead also have shaped my approach to science fiction. I find in the recent works of the genre, in their themes and in their formal features, a new oppositional and resisting form of writing, one that maintains a utopian horizon in the pages of dystopian science fiction and in these anti-utopian times.

Since the conservative reaction of the 1980s and the triumph of free-market liberalism of the 1990s, utopia has been both attacked and co-opted. It has been conflated with materialist satisfaction and thus commodified and devalued. In a society where consumerism has come to represent the contemporary modality of happiness, utopia has become an outmoded

value. The pursuit of individual happiness, which is none other than material success, corresponds to what Darko Suvin has called the “Disneyfication strategy” (194)—a notion and a practice our Italian prime minister has fully embraced. In my approach to science fiction I try to find ways to highlight the transgressive and radical nature of some of its works being written today, because we need to develop a critical perspective that can point us toward action and change.

I need stories that speak to me. We are, in a sense, what we write. There’s a statement by Marge Piercy that I find striking for its simplicity and lucidity at once:

When I was a child, I first noticed that neither history as I was taught it nor the stories I was told seemed to lead to me. I began to fix them. I have been at it ever since. To me it is an important task to situate ourselves in the time line so that we may be active in history. We require a past that leads to us. After any revolution, history is rewritten, not just out of partisan zeal, but because the past has changed. Similarly, what we imagine we are working toward does a lot to define what we will consider doable action aimed at producing the future we want and preventing the future we fear. (“Telling” 1–2)

Women’s science fiction today speaks to our concerns and through a series of strategies and features has renovated the traditionally oppositional nature of the genre.

In particular, I am interested in the discourse of genre and its deconstruction and appropriation. An analysis of women’s take on science fiction allows us to recognize a subversive and oppositional strategy against hegemonic ideology. As feminist scholars, we may want to question the notion of genre, boundaries, and exclusionary politics— notions and practices that have proved detrimental for women— and investigate instead the intersection of gender and generic fiction. The ways in which gender enters into and is constructed by the form of genre have some bearing on, in turn, the creation of new critical texts.

Genres, with their set rules, conventions, and expectations, have been traditionally one of the measures against which to judge a work’s, and a writer’s, greatness. Genres are “essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the *proper* use of a particular cultural artifact” (Jameson 106; emphasis added). Far from being mere aesthetic markers, however, genres are “drenched in ideologies” (Schenck 282), and an analysis of a single work in relation to the genre it belongs to also allows us to understand that work as a product of the historical and literary times in which it was written. Genres are then culturally constructed and rest on the binary between what is normal and what is deviant—a notion that feminist criticism has deconstructed as it consigns feminine practice to the pole of deviation and inferiority. Feminist reappropriations of generic fiction can therefore become a radical and oppositional strategy. The use of generic fiction as a form of political resistance by women has been studied, among others, by Anne Cranny-Francis, and much science fiction research by women scholars (Joanna Russ, Marleen Barr, Sarah Lefanu, Lee Cullen Khanna, Carol Farley Kessler, to cite only a few) has investigated the ways in which gender informs science fiction.

The intersection of gender and genre has opened up the creation of new, subversive, and oppositional literary forms. Science fiction is already regarded as a potentially subversive genre, as it “occupies the space outside the literary enclosure, as a forbidden, taboo, and perhaps degraded product—held at bay, and yet rich in themes and obsessions which are repressed in high culture” (Marc Angenot qtd. in Parrinder 46). In its developments, it has come to represent a form of counternarrative to hegemonic discourse. In its extrapolation of the present, it has the potential to envision different worlds that can work as a purely imaginative (at worst) or a critical (at best) exploration of our society. Science fiction has then the potential, through

estrangement and cognitive mapping, to move its reader to see the differences of an elsewhere and thus think critically about the reader's own world and possibly act on and change that world. Women's science fiction novels have contributed to the exploration and subsequent breakdown of certainties and universalist assumptions—those damaging stereotypes—about gendered identities by addressing, in a dialectical engagement with tradition, themes such as the representation of women and their bodies, reproduction and sexuality, and language and its relation to identity.

But genres change in relation to the times, and our times, characterized by a general shift to the right in the 1980s and 1990s, have produced what a series of scholars have addressed as a “dystopian turn” in Anglo-American science fiction (see Baccolini and Moylan). After the revival of utopia in the 1960s and 1970s, the early 1980s saw the appearance of the cyberpunk movement, whose somewhat self-indulgent cynicism foreclosed any real subversive critique of the conservative society. Science fiction's oppositional and critical potential was instead recovered and renovated in the production of a number of writers such as Octavia E. Butler, Piercy, Le Guin, and Kim Stanley Robinson, who turned to dystopian strategies to come to terms with the decade's silencing and co-opting of utopia. This kind of writing, critical and ambiguous and mainly produced by feminist writers, has become the preferred form for an expression of struggle and resistance.

Utopia is maintained in dystopia, traditionally a bleak, depressing genre with no space for hope in the story, only *outside* the story: only by considering dystopia as a warning can we as readers hope to escape such a dark future. Both Winston Smith and Julia, the main characters of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, are crushed by the totalitarian society; there is no learning, no escape for them. But recent novels such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Le Guin's *The Telling*, and Butler's *Kindred* and *Parable of the Sower*, by resisting clo-

sure, allow readers and protagonists to hope: the ambiguous, open endings maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work. In fact, by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel, the critical dystopia opens a space of contestation and opposition for those groups—women and other ex-centric subjects whose subject position is not contemplated by hegemonic discourse—for whom subject status has yet to be attained.

Another factor that makes these novels sites of resistance and oppositional texts is their blending of different genre conventions. Drawing on the feminist criticism of universalist assumptions, singularity, and neutral and objective knowledge and acknowledging the importance of difference, multiplicity, complexity, situated knowledges, and hybridity, recent dystopian fiction by women resists genre purity in favor of a hybrid text that renovates dystopian science fiction by making it politically and formally oppositional. In *Kindred*, for example, Butler revises the conventions of the time travel story and creates a novel that is both science fiction and neo-slave narrative. Similarly, by fragmenting her account of a future society with a tale (itself the record of oral storytelling) of sixteenth-century Prague in *He, She, and It*, Piercy creates an almost historical science fiction novel. While Atwood employs the conventions of the diary and the epistolary novel in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Le Guin combines a political fable with storytelling for her most recent novel of cultural contact. The notion of an impure genre, one with permeable borders that allow contamination from other genres, represents resistance to a hegemonic ideology and renovates the resisting nature of science fiction.

In most of these novels the recovery of history and literacy, together with the recovery of individual and collective memory, becomes an instrumental tool of resistance for their protagonists. Because it is authoritarian, hegemonic discourse shapes the narrative about the past and collective memory to the point that individual

memory has been erased; individual recollection therefore becomes the first, necessary step for a collective action. In classical dystopia, memory remains too often trapped in an individual and regressive nostalgia, but critical dystopias show that a culture of memory—one that moves from the individual to the collective—is part of a social project of hope. But the presence of utopian hope does not necessarily mean a happy ending. Rather, awareness and responsibility are the conditions of the critical dystopia's citizens. A sense of sadness accompanies the awareness and knowledge that the protagonist has attained. Instead of providing some compensatory and comforting conclusion, the critical dystopia's open ending leaves its characters to deal with their choices and responsibilities. It is in the acceptance of responsibility and accountability, often worked through memory and the recovery of the past, that we bring the past into a living relation with the present and may thus begin to lay the foundations for utopian change.

It is important to engage with the critical dystopias of recent decades, as they are the product of our dark times. By looking at the formal and political features of science fiction, we can see how these works point us toward change. We

need to pass through the critical dystopias of today to move toward a horizon of hope.

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