

Educational valences of Science-Fiction

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Title: "Educational valences of Science-Fiction"

Abstract: This paper identifies and briefly explains a series of educational valences of science fiction literature, in the perspective of self-development, and also proposes for reflection some connections and psycho-pedagogical aspects that facilitate knowledge and formation of the individual's perspective on the world.

Keywords: literature; science fiction; education; self-education; knowledge

Preamble

We begin, justified both chronologically and by exemplarity, with a small appeal to Jules Verne, whose reading, for many of us, has replaced portions of primary and secondary school textbooks. Also, in the first part of the 20th century, H.G. Wells himself aroused interest in scientific fantasies. But, coming to the present day, Isaac Asimov's writings would probably be the favorite example of self-didacticism, on behalf the reader, and we emphasize here the targeted fields: physics, robotics, astronomy, cosmology, xenology, morality. However, through the literary productions of the last decades of the 20th century, we reach disciplines distant from the classical vein of SF – a vein revealed in the middle of a century marked by the idea of cosmic interaction – such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, ecology, biology, entomology, etc. (with the names of writers such as Brian Aldiss, Frank Herbert, Ursula K. Le Guin, George R.R. Martin, Philip José Farmer, etc.).

An attempt to define. Context for self-learning

By accepting the need for a minimal theorizing approach (as a scaffold), we could assimilate the fact that most SF prose subscribes to the following definition: **a human adventure (individual, group, species) carried out in extraordinary conditions (in a**

world that differs from our ordinary world by one or more deviations from natural legitimacy) but in the context of a quasi-scientific coherence (unfolding within the limits of a plausibility, no matter how elastic it may be). We identify in this definition (a definition that I expose here for public judgment) three elements: (1) adventure, experience, drama; (2) anomaly, exceptionality; and (3) a framework of logical coherence, of potential truthfulness. [1]

While main-stream prose (fiction or nonfiction) and fantastic prose (fantasy) cover two of these essential elements, only SF unfolds itself with all three, and it is this triad that ensures its self-defining interweaving of sublime and knowledge.

We stick a bit to the three elements of the newly issued above definition. In the element (1), human adventure, we quickly notice that we could get an extension of the definition if we give up the particle 'human', in the sense that sometimes the characters of SF prose can be other entities than humans (animals, artificial intelligence, extraterrestrial entities), but in the end they will also have similar experiences to human ones, because, for the time being, literature is intended for people. (A handy example of a non-human epic is found in the novel "Ants," written by Bernard Werber.) The element (2), of alterity, of key illegitimacy (the one that ensures the fantastic premise) assumes a deviation from physics, from psychology or biology, from these fundamental sciences as we know them today. (In other words, the extension of a reality coordinate beyond the normal/ordinary; a scientific transcendence as a premise for the extraordinary.) Space travel (cosmic space), time travel (made with a 'time-machine' or simply assumed by anticipation of a moment in the future), parallel worlds/realities, telepathic potencies, extra-sensorial abilities, and the like, are elements that take us out of our everyday and domestic universe, awaken our imagination, challenge us to put ourselves in the place of the characters in SF prose. But, *nota bene*, this unleashing is intended to be coherent, the element (3) of the definition showing us that the game of fantasy takes place with some discipline. Out of respect for readers (for their way of thinking), speculation remains in a quasi-credibility framework, unlike fantasy literature, where "anything is allowed". (Although a classic like Philip K. Dick almost defies this need for SF-type logic, which is a good thing as long as the challenge is constructive. Incidentally, we note that in recent years the demarcation between SF and F is more and more fragile, with good and bad.) In fact, the boundary between the freedom of imagination and that coherence of scientific knowledge is both ineffable and dynamic, and I think we should not theorize it too insistently. Both fantasy and knowledge are essential attributes to us, and perhaps SF literature deserves admiration precisely for its insane courage to play at the exact limit between them.

Polarizing components

Accepting as immanent this function of SF literature, we can also identify a series of aspects through which the reading shows concrete value of self-instruction, both in terms of *quantitative knowledge* (assimilation of knowledge) and *qualitative knowledge*

(practicing abstract thinking, development of relationship and synthesis skills). Of course, at the age of childhood and adolescence, the adherence of the SF genre to the reader depends on some very natural psychic premises (curiosity; spiritual vitality) but also a predisposition for contemplative analysis or even for introspection. Although we are ready to accept that the attraction is as natural as possible, the issue can further be analyzed. [2]

Perhaps the primary ingredient that SF offers us belongs to the category of 'discovery of the world', although, apparently paradoxically, it is a world incongruous with the real one. It's just that here the incongruity comes from a derivative of the real world, a challenging derivative, which will sprightly entail the synapses. In addition, it seems that a touch of drama, of human feelings, helps us to better fix the information. And I will return now to Jules Verne, to whom I owe a great deal of knowledge of physics, chemistry, and geography: it was clear that after the episode in *Captain Hatteras*, the mercury solidification temperature would remain in my mind more efficiently than from the chemistry textbook. (Although in fact the things discovered through those readings would emulatively complement the knowledge from school.) Moreover, in Jules Verne we have another ingredient, more of a psychological substratum, namely **the positivism**: his characters succeed, and problems are solved. (Don't get me wrong! I'm not longer a Jules Verne fan. Now it would be hard for me to willingly read something written by him, but that doesn't negate those concrete aspects. In terms of self-education, his writings remain a shining example.)

We also note, as a particularization to **the knowledge through imaginative experiment** (which would be the root concept here), the temptation of prediction, present in the SF genre through the anticipation component, with its natural challenges of knowing the future or transcending to alternative worlds/universes. (And we observe that in Romanian culture the concept of *anticipation* is often equivalent to that of *science fiction*, although in *stricto sensu* the term would refer only to SF ideas aimed at anticipation, future, utopias, what-if scenarios on the positive axis.) And, speaking of the temptation of precognition, of the utopian experiment, the fact that in volume 2 of the 'Encyclopedia of Romanian anticipation' (Eagle Publishing House, 2017) Mr. Mircea Oprea included an impressive series of Romanian *main-stream* writers is quite meaningful. These writes, belong belonging to the classical literature, were concretely attracted by the idea of anticipation: Tudor Arghezi, Nichita Stănescu, Alexandru Macedonski, Eugen Ionesco, Mircea Eliade, Horia Lovinescu, Gib Mihăescu, Ion Minulescu, Geo Bogza, Ioan D. Sârbu, Ion Marin Sadoveanu, Victor Eftimiu, Mircea Cărtărescu, Ioan Petru Culianu, I.L. Caragiale, Vasile Voiculescu. After all, beyond fantasy, *the experimentation of prediction* is grafted onto an important function of the human psyche: **the need for planning**.

The worlds imagined in SF writings, no matter how fanciful, still have their legitimacies, which the reader feels and assimilates. Mental immersion as in a serious

game, a game with stakes and rules, contributes to the development of the reader's logic and (perhaps unconsciously) to the appreciation of the idea of coherence. Definitely, intuition of the rules of the game is an essential element of attraction. And such things will count significantly in childhood and adolescence, the human ages with the most substantial intellectual development. (Yes, a child "fed" with Philip K. Dick will probably have a different nature than the one "raised" with Isaac Asimov, but this is a risk of "undiversified nutrition" and is part of the events of our world, the real world, in which a young man becomes an artist and another a technician, and only an old kibitzer like me imagines the man as both a technician and an artist.) And above all, we will notice that this logical warp in SF creation often has ethical nuances, as **the loyalty of the game** imaginatively involves the element of *responsibility*.

Balance in all

Those who are part of the today or yesterday's generations who grew up with SF can naturally recognize and confess the valences between this literary genre and the adventure of knowledge that each person assumes in one way or another. Moreover, psychologists and sociologists can probably name the concrete aspects that contribute to the intellectual and cultural development of individuals in today's world (as, in a way, I have tried throughout the above lines). However, it will not be a surprise to find out that too deep and prolonged immersion of the reader in fictional universes can affect the grip on reality. Because the SF&F experience is honest only as long as it remains non-obsessive and is only beneficial if it is non-exclusive.

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