

Research Space

Journal article

Science fiction at a crossroads?

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Science Fiction at a Crossroads?

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There is a moment in the Foreword to *Foundation 1* when G.S. Brosan, Director of North East London Polytechnic, asserts that ‘The importance of science fiction is the freeing of the mind that occurs which makes many of its readers more willing to accept change discontinuous or not’ (Brosan 1972: 2). As I wrote in *Solar Flares* (2010), the 1970s saw a continuation of the fights for gay, Black and women’s rights, with these culture wars being reflected within the science fiction of the era. There was a growing awareness of ecological dangers, the conflict in Vietnam was demonstrating the ongoing problems of competing imperialisms and the space race was losing public interest after a man had been sent to the Moon. If the sf of what I have dubbed the Gernsback-Campbell Continuum had been largely optimistic about technological solutions to humanity’s problems – with the so-called Big Three of Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein and Arthur C. Clarke as not-entirely complicit poster boys – then the American sf of the 1950s (the standard roll call is Alfred Bester, Philip K. Dick, Robert Sheckley, Theodore Sturgeon) had challenged this around the margins and the New Wave had often embraced pessimism. In the British magazine *New Worlds*, sf aspired to a literary experimentalism counter to the stereotypes of pulp genre devices and functional prose, whilst in the US Harlan Ellison edited *Dangerous Visions* (1967), a collection of thirty-three stories breaking taboos around sex, swearing and subject matter. As *Foundation* was being launched, Ellison produced a follow-up volume, *Again, Dangerous Visions* (1972), with a further forty-six. I wish to explore three of these stories – Kurt Vonnegut’s ‘The Big Space Fuck’, Joanna Russ’s ‘When It Changed’ and James Tiptree Jr’s

‘The Milk of Paradise’ – as touchstones from the 1972 crossroads between becoming a literary mode or largely remaining a commercial genre.

Vonnegut long used science fiction tropes as a means of representing fellowships between humans in hostile and uncaring worlds. This had culminated in his novel *Slaughterhouse-5* (1969), a blackly comic narrative of optometrist Billy Pilgrim coming unstuck in time and travelling at random between his future, his present and his past, in particular to Dresden at the time of the Allied bombing. Vonnegut is a diegetic narrator, recalling conversations about trying to write the novel and noting his own presence at fictionalised scenes. A Hugo-Award winning film adaptation was directed in 1972 by George Roy Hill – between his hits *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) and *The Sting* (1973) – showing an interest in the genre from Hollywood. The novel’s anti-war message is toned down, the metafictional element removed and the ending embraces the consolations of heterosexual romance. However, it is typical many of the sf films of the decade after *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) in its attempts to raise serious ideas rather than provide emotional and visual thrills. Vonnegut was becoming more associated with cult writers than the genre and was considering retiring altogether. Ellison declares ‘The Big Space Fuck’ to ‘be the last new piece of fiction you will ever read by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr’ (Ellison 1972: 263); at the time Vonnegut had abandoned *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), which he was to claim would be his final novel. In fact, Vonnegut did return to fiction and draw on science fictional elements for his work.

There’s a sense that Vonnegut chose its title for shock value. The story’s 1979 ‘was a period of great permissiveness in matters of language, so even the President was saying shit and

fuck and so on, without anybody's feeling threatened or taking offense.' (Vonnegut 1972: 267). The transcripts of President Richard Nixon's secret recordings in the White House, peppered with '[EXPLETIVE DELETED]', were yet to be made. However, Vonnegut claims that 'It has been many decades since I have wished to shock a teacher or anyone' (1982: 210), suggesting that a taboo against obscene words is part of an unacceptable censoring of discourse around the body and bodily functions, inequality, war and so on. Susan Farrell argues that Vonnegut approves of rudeness in the young people: 'throughout his essays and fiction, he seems to admire the "bad manners" of the younger generation who are not only willing to use so-called obscene language, but who face obscene circumstances head-on' (2008: 33). The titular space fuck is a literalisation of masculinist imperialism and phallic space probes, in which a payload of human sperm is targeted in the direction of the Andromeda Galaxy. The galaxy takes its name from the Greek myth of the daughter of Cepheus and Cassiopeia, a passive female figure who is chained to a rock in order to be sacrificed to a sea monster and is saved by the heroic Perseus. Vonnegut names his fictional spaceship after Arthur C. Clarke, at that point probably the best-selling sf writer. Humanity's outward urge is coded as masculine and the rest of the universe as feminine, an all-too familiar image for imperialist conquest. It is no accident that most of the story is set on 4th July 1979.

The account of the mission is juxtaposed with Dwayne and Grace Hoobler's discovery that their daughter, Wanda June, is suing them for being bad parents, one of a series of social inventions by Vonnegut. Where our sympathies should lie is unclear – the daughter's experiences do not seem unduly traumatic and she is only bringing the case to avoid a shop-lifting charge, but her parents are not positively represented, with Dwayne considered

insufficiently intelligent to donate his sperm to the space mission and Grace largely defined by extremes of emotion. Grace has four times taken advantage of a population-limiting scheme of elective abortions in return for bathroom scales or table lamps. In an era before the legalisation of abortion via the 1973 Roe vs. Wade US Supreme Court judgement, it is not clear if this is normalising or trivialising the practice.

Russ's 'When It Changed' is set on an all-female planet, Whileaway, where all the men have died out due to a plague six centuries earlier. Now, an all-male space mission arrives and threatens their way of life. It is not immediately obvious that the narrator is female – a sexist presumption would be that it is a man who has 'fought three duels' (Russ 1972: 253). With '*He* turned *his* head – those words have not been in our language for six hundred years – and said, in bad Russian' (254), it becomes obvious. Meanwhile, one of the 'monomaniac' (256) male visitors uses the word 'people' to mean 'men', when even today there is a tendency to use the word 'men' to mean 'people'. The people of Earth have suffered from reduced intelligence thanks to radiation and drugs and plan to use Whileawayans to breed an improved population. The implication is this will destroy Whileaway's utopian society: 'This, too, shall pass. All good things must come to an end.' (260) As Justine Larbalestier notes, the Whileawayans are complete people, able to achieve any task: 'Woman as love interest, woman who is not yet a woman until she is completed and moulded into being by heterosexual penetration, is absent' (2002: 89). The males will take away from the Whileawayan's lives rather than add to them. The story acts as a quasi-prequel to Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), which had been circulating in manuscript for a number of years and was to become a classic critical utopia. There Janet Evason – who shares her first name with

the narrator of 'When It Changed' – is married to Vittoria and men have died from a plague – or have been caused to die out – on an Earth ten centuries from the present.

Whilst the story was to be nominated for both the Hugo and Nebula Awards, it was also attacked by male readers, as Helen Merrick (2009: 49–51) has traced. British sf writer Michael G. Coney wrote to the fanzine *The Alien Critic*, describing it as horrible and hateful. Having noted that he was subjected to prejudice as a white person in the West Indies, he complains that 'I am hated for another reason – because Joanna Russ doesn't have a prick' (1973: 53). Coney seems unable to empathise with the idea that centuries of colonialism and patriarchy might lead to an entirely understandable hostility, which might feel personal but is a reaction to systemic inequality. The accusation of penis envy must have already felt dated in 1973. A number of writers and readers responded in the next issue, including Vonda McIntyre: '[I]t depresses me tremendously to see many people in sf pulling into their shells and creating a misogynistic society that is out of date even in the real world, much less in the supposedly forward-looking realm of science fiction' (1974: 47). Editor Richard E. Geis criticises McIntyre for not wanting to read any more of his fanzine and asserts that as long as men can threaten women with violence, then females will be sex-objects, victims and chattels.

McIntyre's letter and Geis's rebuttal inspired Russ to respond, dismissing the fanzine as 'a men's house miniature world' (1974: 36). She suggests that physical superiority is not in itself the cause of patriarchal oppression, as older men are still able to maintain power over younger, stronger, ones, and that

Sexism is enforced by ideology and economics. A woman does not feel the compulsion to stay with any man because she has to have a man or stop having any personal value [...] The illusion that muscles must mean social power is a fantasy that can be cherished only by very young or very isolated men (37).

Geis doubles down on his own views of violence and sees humanity via a heteronormative perspective.

In his introduction to the story, Ellison refers to

The *machismo* concept, the dominant male attitude, the picture of women as weak and essentially brainless, the deification of Mars as god of war and male supremacy ... these have led us to a world of futility, hatred, bigotry, sexual confusion, pollution and despair. Perhaps it is time the women took a turn at bat (250)

suggesting that 'as far as I'm concerned, the best writers in sf today are the women' (249).

Ellison was not necessarily as innocent of sexism as he might seem here and it is notable that only six of the writers in *Again, Dangerous Visions* are women – with one of them, James Tiptree, masquerading as a man – and only three in *Dangerous Visions*. Russ, alongside Le Guin (for *The Left Hand of Darkness* [1969] and *The Dispossessed* [1974]), Marge Piercy (for *Woman on the Edge of Time* [1976]) and Samuel R. Delany (for *Triton* [1976]) were to become canonical writers for sf critics interested in gender politics as well as in the development of utopia and dystopia. These authors were not necessarily advocating for their imagined futures – in some cases they were warning against them – but collectively they helped shake up misogynist and heteronormative images of society, even as backlash against them and their successor continues, five decades on. Delany was then a rare example of an African American sf writer – Octavia Butler had first been published in the

anthology *Clarion* (1971) and sold a story to Ellison's notoriously delayed *Last Dangerous Visions* – and written science fiction was predominantly white, albeit with significant writers of Jewish heritage. It would be another couple of decades before the sf community was to open itself up to a wider range of ethnicities – and even then, a racist backlash and accusations of wokeness has ensued.

Ellison chooses to end *Again, Dangerous Visions* with 'The Milk of Paradise', calling it the best story in the book and adding

Tiptree is the man to beat this year.

Kate Wilhelm is the woman to beat, but Tiptree is the man (1972: 814).

Ellison notes Tiptree's reluctance to reveal more than basic biographical details and does not know that this was a pseudonym for Alice Bradley Sheldon, who had started publishing in 1968 in Campbell's *Analog*. Whilst she was to publish two novels, her reputation was built on short fiction in an era when the form seemed no longer to be the centre of gravity for the genre. There had presumably been some suspicion of the gender masquerade, as Robert Silverberg wrote that

It has been suggested that Tiptree is female, a theory that I find absurd, for there is to me something ineluctably masculine about Tiptree's writing. I don't think the novels of Jane Austen could have been written by a man nor the stories of Ernest Hemingway by a woman, and in the same way I believe the author of the James Tiptree stories is male (1975: xii).

Russ had invited Tiptree and Delany to join Jeffrey D. Smith's 'Women in Science Fiction' symposium, but came to regret it: 'they are time-hoggers and [... they] keep drawing our attention away from what (to me) is what is truly interesting: what we think' (Smith 1975:

96). Russ was later to reveal that Tiptree had confessed to being a lesbian (Russ 1990: 83), but perhaps none of our binary categories can quite be applied to Tiptree.

'The Milk of Paradise' centres on a human, known as Timor, who has been rescued from a planet called Paradise and now is being persuaded to reveal where its location. Timor can no longer enjoy standard human sexuality: he is unable to successfully have intercourse with women – "It's no good. It's never any good" (Tiptree 1972: 815) – or with men –

He stared at the wetness, the olive boy-flesh.

[...] Olive hands on his legs in the bubbling.

[...] But their flesh grew greasy-hot, and presently he could not do what they wanted (816–817).

– having been attuned to the practices and desires of the Indigenous people of Paradise.

Timor seems to assume a submissive position in intercourse. The woman, Seoul, is on top and the twins, Ottawa [sic] and Hull, ask him "'Are you sub?'" (816), which might refer to the allegedly subhuman and presumably Indigenous Crots or is an early abbreviation of sexually submissive. Timor compares himself to Crots, his foster species being "'Fairer than all the children of men'" (815), and he is accused of being a Crot (817, 824).

When Timor is returned to Paradise, the cities are not as beautiful as he remembers, rather they are smaller and seem to be crumbling mud. When Timor sees the aliens, he at first takes them to be servants (823), whilst his kidnapper, Santiago, suggests "'They make Crots look Human [... They are n]ot even Crots! SUBCROTS!'" (823–824). It may be that Timor's drugged perceptions cause him to misperceive them or he has a false memory of childhood, but he is soon seduced and aroused by alien music and an alien equivalent to sex, which

either kills Santiago or Timor's human aspect. Lilian Heldreth, who suggests that Santiago has been crushed to death (1982: 26), notes that Tiptree repeatedly portrays sex and death as interlinked:

A survey of twenty-seven of them [Tiptree's stories] reveals scenes of physical violence of death in twelve, a direct association of sex with death or violence (or both) occurs in eleven; six of them depict death as ultimately triumphant over the best human efforts. [... O]nly seven are not in some way connected with violence or death (23)

This linkage is not unique to Tiptree, of course, and the name of the planet, Paradise, may be a nod to various forms of afterlife, although the allusion to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' (1797) points us to opioid hallucinations, appropriate for the drugged Timor.

In her analysis of 'A Momentary Taste of Being' (1975), Inez van der Spek repeatedly turns to the idea of paradise, for example in the Pentateuch/Biblical expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and Moses' attempts to return his people to the Promised Land, a land of milk and honey. But van der Spek observes that 'paradises may be deceptive' (2000: 117) and that 'Paradise and the Promised Land are equally imaginary places' (121). van der Spek suggests that Lory, in 'A Momentary Taste of Being', is attempting to heal her split with the lost semiotic/archaic mother as described in Julia Kristeva's model of psychosexual development. However, as Timor is male and is repeatedly associated with being Scout Timor's son (Tiptree 1972: 817, 820, 824), we might be dealing with a restoration of an archaic father-son dyad or – as the Indigenous population of Paradise may not map onto a human binary – a more complex integration of the masculine symbolic order into Kristeva's notion of the (feminine) semiotic. It is not clear what the humans from with the denizens of

Paradise, but the impregnation fantasies (satirised?) in 'The Big Space Fuck' and (dreaded) in 'When It Changed' seem unlikely to be beneficial to their respective Indigenous populations.

The stories in *Again, Dangerous Visions* are designed to shock – although fifty years on we risk patronising the readers of the original publication about their degree of open mindedness. Certainly, the contents still challenge the ways that we perceive our world, which Brosan suggests is what good sf should do. He suspects that, decades on, 'the economic, environmental, sexual and literary climate (to name some aspects of human life) will undoubtedly have changed in ways which are difficult if not impossible to foresee at the moment' (1972: 2). Science fiction could offer a serious way of thinking through the present-day world and its possible futures. It could aspire to the weight of literary.

Of course, in 1977 George Lucas was to release *Star Wars*, ushering in the era of big budget, effects-driven blockbusters, which have made science fiction central to everyday culture in a way Brosan could not have conceived when *Silent Running*, *Solaris* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* might have been playing at his local cinema. It would be foolish to say that these blockbusters lack ideas or that the contemporary written science fiction is any better or worse at challenging its readers, nor should we maintain a rigid distinction between entertainment and the serious. In the meantime, over the next twenty years North East London Polytechnic was to metamorphose into the University of East London and decide that they no longer wanted students who had 'this type of adaptive response' (Brosan 1972: 2). Thanks to David Seed, the collection was to find a new home at the University of Liverpool, curated by Andy Sawyer and then Phoenix Alexander, with a Master's programme attached. Now, we live in a (post?) pandemic world which science fiction hasn't quite

prepared us for, and gender politics, imperialism and Roe vs Wade feel as relevant as ever. The genre still can turn in one direction and question our present and proffer alternatives – or in another and just take this as the way things should be. There is no reason that it should not entertain and challenge us at the same time.

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