

Though cinematic aliens pile up on the White House lawn, and monsters show a fatal attraction to a dwindling colonial power centered in south Britain, science fiction criticism typically considers its subject global in practice and universal in aspiration. This is a position of paradox and therefore worthy both of the fictions of science and of our investigation. What might we say to a genre that by scientific transformation projects itself across other times and spaces, yet seems

technoscientific ideology that undergirds its cultural hegemony. What this leaves out is Other national traditions of scientific fantasy that are legitimate cultural expressions and, indeed possible alternate lines along which the genre may develop. Worse, as Csicsery-Ronay previously indicated in his 2002 article *Dis-imagined Communities*, this is an intractable problem: Given the exuberance and excess of the science fictional imagination, it would be significant if some powerful contemporary institutions were ignored or excluded from the sf megatext. [Nation], with its complex history and implications, is so rarely explored in sf's thought experiments that one might conclude that it has been rejected as something that *cannot* exist in *any* future.<sup>2</sup> Thus notably, in 2008, Csicsery-Ronay can still only gesture to the problem.

Perhaps this is because the omission of nation is founded in the philosophy of science fiction itself or at least, in the philosophy of the genre as it is known to us through its Anglo-American avatars. Csicsery-Ronay observes, in 2002:

sf has traditionally viewed itself as a genre that transcends nationality and nationalism. this globalizing imaginary is based on a notion of history and historical innovation that systematically, though unconsciously, ignores the role of nationality in the development of individual consciousness, to the extent that sf cannot imagine a future society in which nationality has any significance. This postnationalist or antinational orientation forms the basis for some of the most powerful world-construction models in the genre's treasury, models that disavow national particularity. ( *Dis-Imagined Communities*, 218)

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that science fiction's narrative of its own development is necessarily founded in technology. Strong arguments that science fiction as a genre advances with the colonial imperative of the nineteenth century yield to the driving force of empire: worldly and otherworldly dominance depends on the hegemonies of scientific and technological innovation. John Rieder helpfully expresses the synergy between technology, empire, and science fiction. He writes: [The] dominance of steel and coal in the second phase of the industrial revolution is also inseparable from the building of the world-wide railroad system, and the rocketing exportation of heavy machinery from the industrial core countries.<sup>3</sup>

Here we find the science for the fiction. Then the period's improvements in communication and transportation bound the world economy more tightly

together, [but] also marked out ever more clearly the boundaries separating the developed world from the undeveloped one (Rieder, 28). Empire and its others

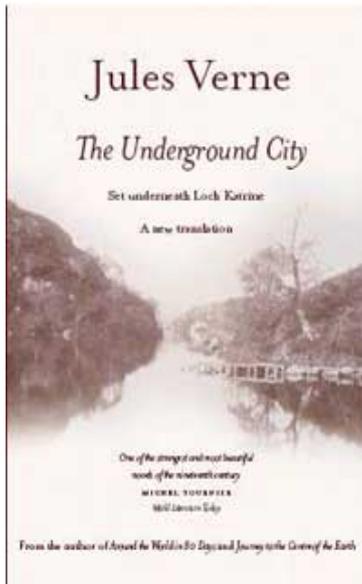
Scotland to contribute to science fiction? Lacking a distinct science, and thus failing to rise to progress, Scotland, apparently, cannot even articulate within the acceptable codes of fiction.

Yet in the discussions of science fiction origins, Scotland might claim priority not as first in science or story, but as always pre-postmodern. Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon note that the genre provides an ideal site from which to explore the liminal, the brink, the verge, the frontier, the edge.<sup>5</sup> However, they invoke the breaking edge of history that is progress to articulate the stresses of a genre always grounded in the problems of its day. And today:

The cautionary post in postmodern represents both our hesitation to let go of the past/present and our anxiety that we are, in fact, on the other side of irrevocable change. This moment of seemingly perpetual cultural and political crisis is represented by a bewildering assortment of postings. The present is postcolonial. It may, in fact, be posthistorical. We verge on both postsubjectivity and posthumanity. (Hollinger, 3)

Notably, such shocking dislocations have long since and continually been acted out among post-Union Scots.

Post-Union Scots, as newly British and no longer unproblematically Scottish, manage to be both colonial and post.<sup>6</sup> This twisting binarism of post/colonialism has rendered even Scotland's recently acquired devolution problematic (1999). The prospect of renewed Scottish difference and power playing through a parliament has been complicated by adjusted loyalties post- and -colonial narratives contend across a term, devolution, that points simultaneously to freedom and a separate progress, and to a backwards evolution. Caught in a vexed present and with no idealizable future, Scots find themselves articulating a compromised space subject to an uncertain temporality. And as they seek to work out their own fictions of being to deal with being on the other side of irrevocable change, in Hollinger and Gordon's terms Scots, Craig suggests, posit values which stand outside of history as we define it: not after history, or before it, but beyond it (Hollinger, 3; Craig, 224). Scientific or not, Scottish fictions imagine places and times elsewhere that embody the perplexity of a culture inevitably located in the present but perhaps crumbling toward modernity.



Scottish fictions that by their projections in place and time often turn out to be scientific fulfill the primary criterion for science fiction as outlined by Darko Suvin. This is a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, by wrestling for generations with im/possible futures (given Scotland's intractable situation), and playing them out in distant spaces and times that are also places defined by current anxieties, Scotland foregrounds science fiction as

a strangely geological and layered phenomenon. Perhaps we should not be surprised, then, that Jules Verne aligns his 1877 *Les Indes noires* according to a distinctly Scottish sense of place. His underground city runs under Loch Katrine (made famous by Walter Scott's romances), and is accessed through the seams of a coal mine.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, it is important to remember that Scotland has offered up major narratives for the fiction of displacement that is science, however much the facts essential to those stories have been appropriated and recast according to the imperatives of empire. Nineteenth-century Scottish science was renowned, whether from the practices of the Edinburgh anatomists that led to reconsiderations of the human as machine (we might think of Robert Knox, and his transcendental anatomy), or James Clerk Maxwell's science of energy that pointed to differential space. The steel revolution cited by Rieder builds from the entrepreneurial spirit of that prototypical Scottish lad of parts, Andrew Carnegie; from Carnegie's railroads to the pathways illuminated by the lighthouse Stevensons' direct ancestors to that inveterate wanderer Robert Louis Stevenson. Scottish technology carved the world into new spaces and transformed the notion of travel in place. Nor should we forget that the Celtic Otherworld has contributed much more than blarney wherever men boldly go. Realities both simultaneous and strangely out-of-step play forward through Scotland's dislocated culture into the alternate spaces of the fiction that is science. Scotland's folk culture has always known the risks and ventures possible for those who turn sideways to the sun.

The problem for today's science fiction, say Hollinger and Gordon, is less to extrapolate a far future than to keep up with a permanently mutable present, to live up to its reputation as a literature of change (Hollinger, 2). At a moment when change seems exponential, but improvement dubious when progress fractures along the fault lines of temporality and ethics Scotland has something to offer. Superpowers fiddle while the globe begins to burn, but from that other side of irrevocable change, Scotland has laid out routes at least to literary survival (Hollinger, 3). Although to be ahead in a devolving world (like Scotland) is to be more embroiled in the im/possibilities extrapolated from the present, Scottish science fiction writers show that to be overtaken by better writers to to

manipulators of, the fictions of science and society.

This article is excerpted from the introduction to *Scotland as Science Fiction*, ed. Caroline McCracken-Flesher (forthcoming, Bucknell University Press).

<sup>1</sup> Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p.11.

<sup>2</sup> Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., Dis-Imagined Communities: Science Fiction and the Future of Nations, in Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon, eds., *Edging into the Future: Science Fiction and Contemporary Cultural Transformation* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002): pp.217-37, see p.218.

<sup>3</sup> John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p.28.

<sup>4</sup> Cairns Craig, *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture* (Polygon, 1996), p.11.

<sup>5</sup> Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon, eds., *Edging into the Future: Science Fiction and Contemporary Cultural Transformation* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), p.4.

<sup>6</sup> See Caroline McCracken-Flesher, Thinking Nationally/Writing Colonially? Scott, Stevenson, and England, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 24.3 (Spring 1991): pp.296-318.

<sup>7</sup> Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (Yale University Press, 1979), pp.7-8.

<sup>8</sup> Jules Verne, *Les Indes noires* (sic, 1877). In Britain, published as *The Child of the Cavern* (1877). The novel's alternate titles include *The Underground City*. Currently available as *The Underground City*, trans. Sarah Crozier (Luath, 2005). Ian Thompson's foreword to this translation notes that two Verne plots are set in Scotland, and three others pass through it, furthermore, Verne delighted in populating his novels with Scottish characters, invariably cast in a heroic mould (ix).

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