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Scotland as Science Fiction
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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 fixated on the North Atlantic linguistic margin, and whose criticism simultaneously and assertively divorces it from such geographical and political parameters?

We can find answers in Scottish science fiction. Superficially, this nationally marked literature is subsumed by the terms both of the universal and the global. Considered part of anglophone science fiction because British, Scottish science fiction is thus “universal,” but as not English, it is less than “global.” In either case, *as* Scottish, it stands invisible to critics. But does that mean it is inoperable?

This oddly imperial yet strangely subaltern literature, positioned both inside and outside the grand critical narratives of the genre, operates as a form of criticism at once geographic and political, scientific and literary. Though supposedly irrelevant because they are Scottish, distinctively Scottish fictions of science disturb our putative futures and help us to address a gap in the history and theory of the genre.

The gap is rather wide, for it encompasses – or perhaps swallows – the whole idea of the nation, any nation, as source or subject for science fiction. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., has worked hard to outline the problem. In his most recent book, he agrees that functionally, at least, “SF is undeniably a predominantly Anglo-American genre.”¹ *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (2008) works from the premise that this genre undergoing consolidation necessarily takes its tone from “the cultural power

of U.S. hyper-modernism and the 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.”² 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.”³ Here we find the

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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 develop along the lines of technologic creativity – perhaps more properly, through technological resources and access. As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, “The most spectacular form of the widening difference between the developed and undeveloped nations was their military technology.” Given a science fiction audience “clustered in the technically advanced sector,” we might extrapolate that the discourse of science fiction is at once imperial and situated in the no-man’s land of technology. The point is only the more obvious in that Rieder begins by founding the imperial impulse of science fiction in “the Copernican shift from a geocentric to a heliocentric understanding of the solar system ... because [it] radically changed the status of other worlds in relation to our own” (1). He then tracks forward through “the marvelous journeys to other worlds written in Galileo’s seventeenth century.” The outward drive of empire is linked with science and technology in a pervasive assumption of “progress.” And of course, the problem is increased when scientific advancement is overwritten by imperially deployed theories about evolution. Whole swathes of the world can be left behind in the fictions of scientific expansionism.

This uninterrogated forward logic poses a particular difficulty for places such as Scotland, specifically because the Scotland of the science fiction era *par excellence* (nineteenth and twentieth century) has been powerfully theorized as “out of history.” Lacking political impact after the Union between England and Scotland of 1707, notes Cairns Craig, Scotland for long years has stood conceptually incapable of progress:

Not having a culture or a history which is shaped exactly like those of a major European culture (whose are, except the major cultures?), not having conformed to the pattern of those cultures whose ‘progress’ is taken to define progression itself, we are only the echo of real events, real achievements, real creations that have already occurred somewhere else – somewhere that is by some magical transformation also the world. Or, as in the case of the Scottish Enlightenment, or Scottish achievements in science and engineering, they are presented as having nothing to do with being Scottish.⁴

Worse, “to lose the sense of history is to live in a vacuum where all process has apparently ceased. In such an environment narrative collapses, and the arts of narrative are bound, therefore, to be problematic” (Craig, 34). What, then, has 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.”⁵ 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 post-historical ... 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-⁶ 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 imag-

ine 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.”⁷ 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.⁸

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 time is also to figure as persistent. There *is* another side to irrevocable change.

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay notes that “It is difficult to imagine something that one does not care about” (“Dis-Imagined Communities,” 236). Today, science fiction writers in dominant/technological places define their genre, and barely recognize other traditions – whether of literature or of science fiction. The disconnect, he thinks, will only get worse, for elites increasingly see themselves “as potential internationals or singleton multinationals” (237). More positively, perhaps, “tens of millions of people will move across borders of nation-states and find their loyalties divided, their vision of the future clouded.” Could we hope that a divided loyalty will mean an interrogated tomorrow? Less positively, “it will seem that only the technohistorical center will have a future.” What, Csicsery-Ronay wonders, will other writers and readers do? Will they still want to write science fiction, which means using “the tools of hegemony”? “So far,” he concludes, “we have seen only the science fiction futures of the nations that think they are empires. We must wait to see whether the nations who think they are nations will imagine different futures.” But of course, we already can posit an answer – one not in line with the desires, but perhaps nonetheless to the good of both center and periphery.

As Cairns Craig says, “the fundamental trajectory of the modern Scottish novel has not been within the narrative of history, but between history and its other, between the mapmaker’s map and an ‘otherworld’ where space has different dimensions.”⁹ Perhaps Scottish literature is, inevitably, science fiction, and as such, a model for other places, and future spaces. So as progress falls back on itself, readers and science fiction writers alike can follow the routes mapped to alternate spaces by Scots long ago caught within, and thus al-

ready nimble manipulators of, the fictions of science and society.

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Excerpted from the introduction to Scotland as Science Fiction, ed. Caroline McCracken-Flesher (forthcoming, Bucknell University Press).

Notes

- 1 Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 11.
- 2 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* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002): 217-37, see 218.
- 3 John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 28.
- 4 Cairns Craig, *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996), 11.
- 5 Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon, eds., *Edging into the Future: Science Fiction and Contemporary Cultural Transformation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 4.
- 6 See Caroline McCracken-Flesher, "Thinking Nationally/Writing Colonially? Scott, Stevenson, and England," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 24.3 (Spring 1991): 296-318.
- 7 Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 7-8.
- 8 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 (Edinburgh: 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).
- 9 Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 241.



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