SCIENCE FICTION, AND THE PROBLEM(ATIC) OF SERIOUSNESS

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This article argues that science fiction's discursive cultures have a particular concern with the quality of seriousness: of its texts, authors, readers, fans and the wider genre itself. First distinguishing this perceived quality of seriousness, I argue that it is a meta-concern of sf—a problematic—visible in arguments around the genre's functions as, for example, estranging, inuring or oracular, or through its connection to science. I posit that the quality of seriousness sprung up as an alternative to literariness—long denied to the genre—and that this seriousness/literariness dialectic still defines the discursive object we call sf.

INTRODUCTION

It is only slightly reductive to say that the modus operandi of literary criticism is the making of seriousness. The literary critic aims either directly, or by the simple application of their attention, to confer seriousness upon their subject. That is, through taking their subject seriously, they signal that it is worth taking seriously. In science fiction (sf), a young genre with memories of marginalisation, the quality of seriousness was, for some time, strained. In sf's early years, attitudes to the genre, particularly in academic and literary spheres, alternated between patronising and excoriating. The first sf critics had an uphill battle, it being necessary to prove that there was something in sf worth taking seriously while professionalising the critique of the same. This lent itself to a feedback loop, entangling the means of the genre's analysis with an anxiety about its perceived seriousness. To pick a forebearing example, this dialectic is clearly visible in Darko Suvin's historic defining of the genre by cognitive estrangement, and his ensuing description of "90 or even 95 percent of sf

production [as] strictly perishable stuff" (*Metamorphoses* vii). Sf and its criticism are clearly enjoying a very different zeitgeist to that faced by its earliest critics. However, these concerns with seriousness—the seriousness of sf's writers, readers, fans, texts, and, nebulously, the wider gestalt of the genre—descend through its discursive and critical heritages and continue to influence contemporary discourse, both lay and academic. Moreover, despite the near omnipresent discussions of seriousness in the field—which far exceed the yet common references to so-called 'Serious Sf' or seriousness in sf—the concept itself has gone undescribed. This article seeks to rectify this omission.

   To briefly situate and give weight to these claims, consider the tensions produced just by the label of science fiction. Take, for example, Margaret Atwood's infamous description of science fiction as "rockets, chemicals and talking squids in outer space" (Langford), which formed part of a plea to use the term speculative fiction when referring to her work. Ursula Le Guin, reacting with both scorn and understanding to this, conjectured that Atwood's preference for speculative fiction was because "she doesn't want the literary bigots to shove her into the literary ghetto" (n.p.). The legitimacy of this fear is underlined by Langford in his discussion of this back and forth, in which he points to reviewsof *Oryx and Crake* (2003) that used the opportunity of the novel going mainstream as an opportunity to disparage its wider genre. *The New York Times*' Sven Birkerts, for instance, *opens* his review by arguing that "science fiction will never be Literature with a capital 'L' because it inevitably proceeds from premise rather than character. It sacrifices moral and psychological nuance in favour of more conceptual matters, and elevates scenario over sensibility." And if the zeitgeist has changed in the last twenty years, it hasn't changed completely. In 2019, Michael Faber recounted his surprise at hearing radio show panellists arguing that his novel *Under the Skin* wasn't sf "because it was beautifully written and had such strong characterisation and profound themes," an attitude which, he argued, showed the still "institutionalised disrespect for the

genre" (Ditum). Such instances form *negotiation*s of the genre's seriousness which, visible even in these short instances, span many interlinked concerns: from textual features to authors to readers to reading culture, and even sf's generic identity.

One of the only works that directly sets its sights on seriousness in literature—Stanley G. Eskin's aptly titled "Seriousness: A Literary Anxiety" (1972)—posits that "The question of seriousness and non-seriousness in literature is part of—but separable from—the broader and perhaps prior question of the seriousness and non-seriousness *of* literature" (261, emphasis in original). Thus, Eskin suggests that the perceived seriousness of a text relates to it *as a piece of literature*, and its worth tied to its potential to fulfil literature's wider function (or functions), whether we see that in the social, psychological, personal, aesthetic or other realm(s). Which is to say that the idea of "serious literature" is clearly bigger than sf, and it is from sf's relationship with wider literature—and literature's place in culture—that these complications spring.

Genre fiction as whole tends to inherit a concern with seriousness that intersects with both the genre's identity and that which it is being defined against, whether rendered as capital-L Literature or some manifestation of the mainstream. Comparable conversations frame diverse cultural output: take crime vs. noir, romance and 'chick-lit', comics vs. graphic novels, musicals and pantos, directors vs. auteurs, art- or elevated-horror and just-horror, and so on. While such discursive trends offer valuable context, this article focuses its attention on sf's *generically specific* relationship with seriousness. It elaborates this through two strands: sf's specific critical, lay and publishing history; and its formal mode, its inherent *alterity.* In relation to sf's history, I will argue that sf's advocates, finding literariness a difficult foundation on which to base their significance claims for the genre (and their work on it), combined the extra-literary qualities of sf into an alternative valuing framework—or quality—of seriousness. In relation to alterity, I will argue that, as a fundamentally

speculative genre, sf is dependent on some sort of codification or understanding of seriousness on which the reader's judging of the sf world's difference—its extrapolation, estrangement, science, etc—at least partially depends.

Sf's discursive cultures—contributed to by those that write in it, edit it, publish it, discuss it, and organise fannish activities around it—have grappled with some idea of seriousness from the genre's birth. The 'hardness' of hard sf, for example, can be broadly summarised as a serious attitude towards the text's science, or what a particular locutor believes to be 'serious' science. Or, according to Vint and Bould, the degree to which the laws of nature are confused with those of capitalism (cf. "There is No Such Thing a Science Fiction"). On the academic side, the cognitive of Suvin's cognitive estrangement—and its many reworkings— are clearly an attempt to grapple with something that could simply be summarised as a serious attitude towards the task of speculation. More recent theorisations—for example, from Miéville and Rieder—that underscore the centrality of authority in sf, take a step back from the science and speculation framing to advocate for a serious attitude towards epistemology.

In sf, then, the act or stance of taking something seriously is of particular concern because of its 'S': its science, speculation or other; or, the departure from the real world or alterity entertained in it. This relationship with seriousness is thus expansively significant as a text's speculation forms an attitude not just to the possible, plausible or entertainable, but to knowledge and ways of knowing (cf. Rieder's *Speculative Epistemologies*). To argue that a text is Serious sf—or to otherwise attend to it seriously—is to argue for the legitimacy or value of its speculations, the type of attention it deserves, the type of interpretive tactics and effort it requires, and the potential reward of the same. Establishing a framework for these judgements has driven the expansion of definitions for the genre, perhaps even their exploding, and relates directly to the apportioning of the resource that is science fiction

studies' energy and attention. The relationship between such frameworks and their directing of attention can be seen in, for example, Ida Yoshinaga's 2022 call for Science Fiction Studies 3.0: a criticism-as-activism 'turn' in the field. Thus, seriousness is not just significant in its bearing on genre definitions or boundaries, or even for its role in securing critical and sustained attention. It is, at its core, a concern with influence and authority: whose futures do we pay attention to, how must these futures be written, who gets to be a speaker for their future, whose perspective is valued, and how do things come to be known. Who and what is taken seriously, in what way, and why?

This article argues neither for nor against sf's seriousness, but rather attempts to reframe the concept, and to illustrate how science fiction's critical and discursive cultures—particularly through attempts to position and define the genre—navigate the *problematic* of seriousness. I specify this as a problematic to situate seriousness not as a single, solvable problem, but as a meta-problem defined by ever-evolving interrogations. While sf's discursive culture remains significantly invested in the genre's seriousness—even if it is no longer as forthright about this concern—this meta-level has been scarcely attended to. This dearth of attention is evident, for example, in the convolutions seen in questions about the value of the genre that causes us to miss the frame of the question itself, and what the 'quality' of seriousness—in reader, text, author and culture—actually is. What does it mean to be serious, or be seen as such: to perform, attain, maintain, and measure seriousness? To treat someone or something seriously? And to what effect do we do this, and to whose benefit (or loss)? Thus, this article reframes a number of genre- and field-defining discussions by unearthing what I see as their foundational concerns.

My perspective here is relatively limited to Anglophone sf, and while I anticipate that aspects of this discussion will have strong relevance to other traditions, markets and communities of sf, I likewise expect that different historical and cultural contexts will

naturally produce different conceptualisations of Serious sf.[1] Nevertheless, the hope for this article is that this foundation will support fuller studies of seriousness in and beyond the genre. On the note of 'beyond': this article is also clearly concerned with Fantasy, and how discursive borders have been, and still are, used to distinguish fantasy from sf. However, for the sake of an already stretched scope, I focus on sf as science/speculative fiction due to the need to explore the specific discursive artefact of sf, though fantasy's relationship with seriousness should also gain distinction from this discussion. Likewise, though my discussion does seek to trace the borders of sf's wider culture, my perspective is largely situated in the study of literary sf. This is not, however, to shortchange the relevance of sf drama, film, poetry and so on to this conversation, but rather in acknowledgement of the significant differences in such medial cultures, which, through their medium, are already plugged into different prestige networks than literary sf.

What I do offer in this article is a broad account of seriousness, and a critical framework for exploring discursive negotiations of it. I focus on seriousness as a discursive artefact, a shared cultural idea to which we, as individuals, have different access, and that we negotiate and change through our reading, writing and discussion of the genre. To establish such, this article first elaborates a foundational understanding of seriousness in literature, specifically in relation to literariness, before it proceeds to sf. I then build towards an analysis of particularly emblematic negotiations of the genre's identity which are predominantly concerned with its social use, its relationship with the mainstream and its literary potential. Beyond revealing the underlying concerns with seriousness that define these negotiations, I also aim, through this

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[1] I am valuably informed on other practices, communities and traditions of sf by texts such as Yoshinaga et. al.'s *Uneven Futures* and by the trojan work of CoFUTURES. However, my knowledge of such traditions is nowhere near full enough to extend my claims beyond the western Anglophone sphere by which this research is most fully informed.

anatomising, for the concept to accrete distinction so that we gain an understanding of the shifting standards for sf's specific relationship with seriousness. I then proceed into an analysis of what I see as the keystone of sf studies' critical concern with seriousness: Suvin's introduction of cognitive estrangement to the field, reactions to it, and the progression to more recent theorisations of authority, epistemology and the *doing* of sf. I thus aim to introduce the problematic of seriousness as a topic of study in SF, and to sketch the guidelines of this phenomenon which, either because of or despite its omnipresence, has eschewed distinct distinction.

NEGOTIATING SERIOUSNESS

Valuing terms like 'literary' or 'serious' have different characteristics in individual usages or negotiations. However, considering them as relative in this way does not entail complete relativity. A 'negotiation'—here a broad umbrella covering both the individual mental work of categorising a text and the wider discussions of such categorising—requires drawing on wider culture, and therefore implicitly builds the opinion on, or against, the opinions of others. While such a conceptualisation of seriousness has not been explored, Meyer-Lee provides critical precedence to this project through his work on the related idea of literary value. He draws on Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to position literary value as a negotiated concept, positing that "an agent may ascribe literary value to virtually any text, regardless of the intentions of its original producers or the specific characteristics of its manner." But, he caveats, the ascription of literary value places the ascriber in a network which imposes limits on that individual ascription: "all activities of valuing occur . . . within a network that enables that activity but also, by that same token, constrains it" (344). Accordingly, "literary value in pragmatic practice, therefore inheres neither in reader nor in text, *but in activities of mediation among these and other agents*" (344, emphasis added).

It thereby also stands that discussing whether a text is serious—whether directly or through related terms—can only be done by reference to pre-existing standards and frameworks, even if it is in dispute of them. Such discussions contribute to the wider gestalt of the discursive artefact—say, a definition of sf—but a single discussion or utterance does not noticeably change the artefact unless it convinces others. That is, the cultural construction influences and is influenced by individual constructions, but is, itself, of a greater order. While a cultural construction of seriousness is essentially consensual, it is agonistically so. And the consensus here is clearly not democratic, as the support which a construction requires to remain relevant or influential may rest more on cultural authority than the sheer numbers of people who maintain it. Seriousness is thus valuably considered as a negotiation in order to maintain focus not only on the people, processes and regimes involved, but also the stakes. Without conducting the entire argument through ANT, we can yet use it as a springboard to conceptualise the interaction between the ascriber and the network of ascription, that is, to put a reader in the context of their reading culture, and thus observe both what they draw from that culture and what they provide to it.[2]

DEFINING: SERIOUS, SERIOUSLY, SERIOUSNESS

Common usage of the words 'serious' or 'seriousness' is often of the hand-waving variety: relatively undefined, often standing in for several intertwined ideas. Exploring seriousness as its own *thing* challenges us to be able to account for it with greater precision. Broadly, I consider four interlinked levels that contribute to the discursive artefact of serious literature and literary seriousness:

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[2] My conceptualisation here owes a debt to Rieder's examination of sf's regimes of publicity, particularly in his illustration of the genre's relationship with authority and consensus (cf. *Speculative Epistemologies* and *The Mass Cultural Genre System*).

- The level of the author, who may be serious, perform seriousness, adverbially take their task seriously, and be subject to certain expectations in order to receive serious attention;

- The level of the reader, who judges the text and author and acts on this judgement, and who—in their reading and potential explication of that reading—may experience, perform and confer seriousness;

- The level of the text, whose individual textual strategies will act as catalysts for the perception of the text (and author) as serious (or as estranging, political, worthy, having a message, literary, plausible, and so on), and whose reading and interpretation by the reader requires reference to reading culture.

- And the level of the reading culture, being composed of these interactions between texts, authors and readers, and the conversations around what serious texts and serious attention to texts looks like.

Landmarks which might signal that we are navigating a discussion of seriousness include authority, intent, performance, prestige, and impact.

If we start at seriousness' most basic or immediate meaning, we start at *being serious*, as an attitude. We must also think about its adverbial aspect—seriously—as a modification of another activity: performing seriously, playing seriously, taking something seriously. Doing something seriously tends to be a descriptor of the type and quality of energy and attention put into something, or even the activity of maintaining such a disposition. We also refer to seriousness in ways that both depict it as both an absolute state and as scalar, i.e., 'half-serious.'

At a more literal level, we might understand the question of whether someone is serious as relating to whether they are or are not joking—that is, did they mean what they said, were they in earnest? It is tempting to say that this is not usually the type of seriousness that we

tend to discuss in literary criticism, but there are forests worth of books dedicated to irony, satire, sarcasm and so on. Literary modes require some combination of seriousness and pretence, or a pretend seriousness in imagining and interpreting unreal things. This is particularly the case in sf, which necessitates a sort of ludic contract between the speculating author and the disbelief-suspending reader. On the side of the ludic, we can also add an understanding of interpretation as a kind of serious game played with the puzzle of the text. My later discussion of authority, and the potential of ludic engagement with it, will return more fully to this aspect of seriousness.

Expanding the idea of seriousness into literary seriousness requires us to interrogate what we mean when we say that an author is serious because of what they write, how they write it, how they research their work, the impact they aim to achieve, the readers or markets they aim it for, and so on. What it means to *do* serious literature is clearly more than writing with either focus or a frown. And we must also consider the 'unserious', or that which forms a threat to one's reputation for seriousness. Michael Chabon, for example, reviewing Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, notes that the post-apocalyptic "is one of the few subgenres of science fiction . . . that may be safely attempted by a mainstream writer without incurring too much damage to his or her credentials for seriousness."

On the side of the reader, we also have a number of factors to consider. Their recognising of seriousness, for example, whether in intent, subject matter, contexts, or ability, or in a text and its paratexts. And, then, their own enaction of serious reading, and their experience of seriousness, that is, how it feels to be serious or take something seriously. The *experience* of seriousness—of focused, perhaps higher-stakes reading—is particularly salient for studies of interpretive communities within, for example, sf studies or fandom, and warrants further comment elsewhere. On the topic of authors and readers, different demographics, and the texts they are associated with, are also subject to different expectations of seriousness, for

example, romance or young adult (YA). Indeed, the idea of seriousness is also a constant in the discursive communities around such. See, for example, both sides of this conversation in relation to YA in Graham (2014) and Castle (2024), or an account of this discursive trend in Romance in Rodale (2015).[3]

DISTINGUISHING: SERIOUSNESS AND LITERARINESS

Once we move beyond a seriousness of intent, or earnestness, discussions of seriousness in literature tend to point toward the worth of taking something seriously, which often—but not always—relates the seriousness or skilfulness of the work's assembling. Per Eskin, questions of the seriousness of literature tend to relate to its function *as* literature. Thus, it is necessary to trace the overlaps of literariness and seriousness in order to distinguish one from the other. In relation to literature's function, we can think about the type of experience the text offers, and why or how it is worth our attention (and, perhaps, what type or *strength* of attention). This may be an aesthetic or even just entertaining experience, but—and sharpening our focus towards sf—we also strongly consider extra-literary worth: for example, a text's personal, historic, affective or didactic offerings, which are not exactly separable from the literary, but are clearly entangled with it rather than identical. In sf, this dialectic is of particular importance, as the genre's adherents and critics have endeavoured to expand cultural understandings of literariness (and extra-literary worth) to either include or accept sf's offerings, as evidenced, for example, in discursive shifts from science fiction to speculative fiction. Indeed, sf's initial problems with seriousness were largely based on particular interpretive communities perceiving a lack of literariness in the genre. Again, this problematic descends from the problematic of literariness—which is likewise a continuous

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[3] I owe thanks to Veera Mäkelä for a deep dive into this debate in Romance studies.

rather than discrete phenomenon—and how literary value is ascribed and policed (denied, hoarded, bargained with, etc.). The exhaustive attempts of early sf academics to provide a literary definition of sf were much concerned with this.

We must add to this that ideals of literariness—in all their variety—are typically didactic in some way that relates to the aesthetic experience of the text as instructive or nourishing of some kind of growth or positive experience.[4] Thus, while literariness, as a descriptor, tends to connote that a text's value is in certain aesthetic experiences, the wider worth which we attribute to literature commonly encompasses political and educational functions, including those frequently cited as being in sf's particular purview. Bearing this in mind, we can further differentiate literariness from seriousness. The description of literary, or ascription of literary value, argues for aesthetic value and, *through this*, the worth of the text, and its candidacy for serious reading. Thus, to argue for a text's literary value is to argue for, at the very least, serious attention to it. Contrarily, to argue for serious attention to a text does not have to be an argument for its literary value. While such a negotiation might argue for an expansion of what is considered literary, it can also seek to unhitch the idea of serious literature from literariness.

Accordingly, while arguments for sf's worthiness of serious attention can be conducted through arguments for its literariness, seriousness can also be sought through features that are, essentially, extra-literary. Thus, seriousness begins to take shape as a quality in itself, and the descriptor of Serious sf can be sensibly deployed in a way that does not, to any great extent, comment on a text's literariness or aesthetic experience. Serious sf, even as a haphazardly deployed descriptor, tends to point towards the genre's extra-literary didactic

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[4] Though we must also consider the cultural capital that literature—particularly 'literary' or complex works— offers to readers. Even rote knowledge of quotations, references or plot points (for example, from Shakespeare), divorced from an aesthetic experience, may be of practical value to individuals in different social situations.

effects: for example, its attitude to science, the extent of its worldbuilding, the consideration of its speculation, its educational value, its oracularity, and so on. This dialectic is present from sf's very start as *scientifiction* in Hugo Gernsback's hawking of the genre as having the ability to "supply knowledge . . . in a very palatable form" (3), thereby pairing entertainment with education.

This representation of the genre—in which its scientific and speculative value supersedes its literary—has been hugely successful for those who write and write about sf. It received its patron saint in Isaac Asimov, whose articles in venues such as *The New York Times*, on topics such as the colonisation of the moon (1967), ensconced in the seriousness of a Serious Publication, signalled that sf was a place for the science-minded, for those seeking to understand and affect the future. Today, in the venues where Asimov commented on the moon, Kim Stanley Robinson comments on Mars (or cryptocurrency, or climate change, or the EU, etc.), demonstrating that a certain scientific 'hardness' remains strong currency for trading with the mainstream.

This understanding of the genre also remains powerfully relevant in sf's critical culture: Sherryl Vint, for example, has recently (2021) outlined her preferred understanding of genre as a cultural form that offers "an 'everyday' language for thinking about and responding to daily life in twenty-first century" (6), a distinctly literary-less rendering of the genre. Ida Yoshinaga suggests a similar definition-as-calling, re-orientating sf as a thing that one *does,* and specifically positions the genre in relation to ethical use cases: imaging alternative cognitions, futures, communities and so on; performing "community-engaged justice;" or serving as "an imaginative way of collectively organizing. . . a contemporary aesthetic of interdependency" (167). In essence, such arguments for taking sf seriously build and draw upon an alternative valuing framework for it. While sf's agents never gave up efforts to form attachments to literary networks, they likewise invested—perhaps more heavily—in forming

links with other sources of worth and/or prestige: science, politics, logic, futurology, activism, etc.

CULTIVATING SERIOUSNESS: A VERY SHORT HISTORY OF SF

With an understanding of the anatomy of seriousness in place, it is time, then, to take aim at some negotiations of the concept to both illustrate our critical inquiry in action and, by doing so, to begin to reveal sf's genre-specific relationship with seriousness. The larger work of this is a book length study in which I am currently engaged. What I can offer here is a model for this wider investigation that illustrates some typical seriousness negotiations in the genre, including some of its paradoxes. I begin with a whistlestop tour of some genre-defining discussions, with the individual points perhaps less important than the constellation formed by their assembling. This constellation, though concerned with literary value and literariness—and the prestige offered by such—is more significantly and thoroughly interested in extra-literary qualities and, as seen above, in use-cases for sf.

We can start at a start: Hugo Gernsback's introduction to the first issue of *Amazing Stories* (1926), where, backed up by the claim that Jules Verne predicted the submarine "down to the last bolt," Gernsback trumpets that posterity will point to the stories of *Amazing* as having "blazed a new trail, not only in literature and fiction, but in progress as well." Fast forward to one of the first critical works on sf, astronomer Patrick Moore's 1957 *Science and Fiction*, and we already find the claim that "BEMS [Bug-eyed Monsters], anti-gravity and space-guns are . . . out of the question and novels which make use of them cannot be taken seriously" (101). In the fan reactions to Moore's book, we see the other side of this coin. John Roles, for example, in his review for the Liverpool-based fanzine *Space Diversions*, claims that "Moore denies science fiction the very wonder that is its glory. . . . The possibility of intellectual exercise or the aesthetic pleasure, he ignores completely," a charge emblematic of many decades of fan/critic relations.

Jump forward a few more years to Harlan Ellison's introduction to *Dangerous Visions* (1967), and his outlining of the project of the New Wave, in which he announces that there are a "coterie of critics, analysts and readers who contend that 'mere entertainment' is not enough, that there must be pith and substance to every story, a far-reaching message or philosophy or super-abundance of superscience." He continues, announcing that sf "has been found, has been turned to good use by the mainstream, and is now in the process of being assimilated" (xxxvi). In the introduction to the 35-year anniversary edition, *Dangerous Visions* is eulogised as a "stately, serious, academically-noted tome of significant writing" (xvii), despite the fact that "some chose to see an upstart snootiness in what we hungered to do, saw it as disrespect for the elders and traditions of the genre" (xv).

Skip to the next movement and we have Bruce Sterling—under the penname of Vincent Omniaveritas—describing the state of the genre in the 1980s: "Is SF suffering from intellectual exhaustion?" he asks. "Perhaps it takes itself too seriously and has lost the careless vigor it had when it was mere pop crap" (*The Complete Cheap Truth* 10) Here, sf's heritage in the pulps is generative, rather than shameful, and its distance from this heritage enervating. Sterling continues:

> [SF's] most formally gifted authors must escape their servant's mentality and learn
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> to stop aping their former masters in the literary mainstream. Until that happens,
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> SF will continue sliding through obsolescence toward outright necrophilia. (11)

Here, the mainstream assimilation crowed over by Ellison is killing the genre. Sterling takes up the point again in his later preface to the *Mirrorshades* anthology: "Some critics opine that cyberpunk is disentangling SF from mainstream influence, . . . (And others—hard-line SF traditionalists with a firm distrust of "artiness"—loudly disagree)" (x).

These 'negotiations' of sf's identity—its distinction, its vitality, its capacity for seriousness, for mainstream attention and assimilation—though relatively scattered through

the genre's history, are emblematic of a discursive culture which should be familiar to any sf critic or fan. Just as with Vint and Yoshinaga, in defining what sf is, what it offers, and what it could be, it is clearly not just the qualities of literariness, even sf specific forms of literariness, that are championed. We can understand these extra-literary literary ambitions as, essentially, a desire for the genre to be taken seriously by writers, readers and the wider world, but also for science fictional seriousness as its own quality. And, indeed, for the 'negotiator' to be taken seriously—whether as writer, critic or reader—a point to which we will return. Seriousness, for its part, is rendered variously as pith and substance, as far-reaching, message-having, as politically generative, as instructive, as the right type of science, as aligned either with or against the so-called elders and traditions of the genre (pitting a community's authority against that of mainstream literary gatekeepers), and as the 'quality' of 'being noticed'. We also see seriousness commonly rendered as somehow incompatible with wonder,[5] with fun, unless it is providing the entertainment that offsets the worthy message: the strictly prescribed spoonful of sugar to spoonful of medicine.

Significantly, we see seriousness perceived as the necessary ingredient for mainstream assimilation, an association that crops up again and again in discussions of the genre. But also, as in Sterling (and as would be later taken up by Luckhurst), we have the mainstream represented as a site of death for sf *as sf*, so that the performance of seriousness required for the mainstream renders the text a mere performance of sf. Thus, to be serious is perceived to be less sf-like. The mainstream, in these discussions, is more undescribed than it is indescribable, and it consequently looms over the genre like a Lovecraftian old one, the

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[5] That there is a relative dearth of sf critical work on wonder is telling. We can find some reason for this in the general devolution of 'sense of wonder' into *sensawunda* in sf fandom. At times, its usage is loving—referencing a feeling that brings fans together—but it also skews towards mockery, a mark of the not-yet-jaded. That is, it is often associated with the juvenile, and stands in opposite to seriousness.

ancien regime of Literature which beckons but also devours. The problematic of seriousness is, perhaps, principally powered by the charge formed by the distance between these two discursive poles—the genre and the mainstream—a distance imagined in Sterling's diatribes, in particular, as necessary to zap the corpse of the genre back to life.

Aspects of this debate are clearly cyclical, and can be explained not just by changes in the cultural zeitgeist, but the needs or desires of individuals to be seen to make such changes. That is, from the genre's potential to serve as cultural capital, or, indeed, to damage the same. Rieder turns to Bourdieu to make sense of this, noting that writing in and about the genre is partially driven by a desire for 'consecration' by our peers ("On Defining" 205). He argues that Gernsback, Campbell and Moorcock distanced the genre from dynamics that have exclusive identification with avant-garde, high-art practices, and aligned it instead with "the communities of practice of sf professionals and fans" (205). To return to the four levels of seriousness introduced earlier, such negotiations of the genre's value must span all such levels, including the ascriber. Taking this holistic view, we can see that cultural capital is not derived from literature itself, but from those who value literature, or types of literature. Thus, in thinking about cultural capital, changes to the generic zeitgeist must be considered in relation to *who* one wants to be taken seriously by: who will trade in the particular capital acquired, and at what exchange rate.

CODIFIYING SERIOUSNESS: COGNITIVE ESTRANGEMENT

Let's shift our attention to this dialectic in f Studies and how these concerns intersect with the prestige-orientation of academia, the *worth-case* necessary to justify academic attention, and what strengthening sf's cultural capital in this very particular market involved. We can start, here, with another start: Suvin's "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre" (1972), largely understood as the foundation of the field, even if a flawed one. Here, the titular poetics of the article—an ostensibly formalist approach to judging literary worth—takes a

backseat to establishing the worth of taking sf seriously, focusing on its readerly experience, its ensuing political potential, and the importance of this potential among particular demographics and at that particular time in history. Using cognitive estrangement definitionally results in one of Suvin's largest influences on sf's critical culture: connecting the genre's ability to didactically affect its readers with both its distinction from the mainstream and its distinction from other Fantastic fictions. Thus, Suvin conjured boundaries for science fiction from the quality of seriousness, and entwined cognitive estrangement with the idea of Serious sf.

Cognitive estrangement is essentially Suvin's attempt to concurrently argue for the genre's significance through both the serious-coded cognitive and the erstwhile literary-coded estrangement. Or, perhaps, to argue that the genre's political potential *is* its literary potential. In fact, Suvin can be seen to code *two* extra-literary ideals into the literary critique of sf. As noted by Renault, Suvin infuses estrangement's literary essence with politico-didacticism by deriving it not from Shklovsky's earlier *ostranenie*—in which estrangement is posited as defining of literariness—but from Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt*, and a seriously modified version that he welds to a vague rendering of the scientific method (Renault 119). Further noting that Suvin's concept of the novum is derived from the Marxist critic Ernst Bloch, Renault goes on to argue that his delineation of the cognitive signals an aim to "[redefine] scientific cognition as synonymous with Marxism" (120). Thus, in the keyword tripartite of novum, estrangement and cognition, all are rendered with extra-literary aspirations.

In relation to cultural capital and peer-group consecration, an understanding of the professional and historical context of Suvin's theory further underscores the particular prestige concerns of "On the Poetics." Suvin opens the article not with a claim about sf as a literature, but as a social force whose importance is on the increase, and whose "popularity in the leading industrial nations (USA, USSR, UK, Japan) has risen sharply …" (372). He

continues, underscoring the "key strata of modern society" that sf reaches: "college graduates, young writers, and general readers appreciative of new sets of values." He then moves to establishing value by connecting sf to genres whose (literary, political and historical) value have already been established, "the Greek and Hellenistic 'blessed island' stories, the 'fabulous voyage' from Antiquity on, the Renaissance and Baroque 'utopia' and 'planetary novel,' the Enlightenment 'state (political) novel,' the modern 'anticipation,' anti-utopia,' etc." He proceeds to disentangle sf from its association with 'low value' genres, namely fantasy and the fairy-tale. Envisioning this through ANT's 'networks', Suvin is here connecting sf to high-prestige networks, ranging from those represented by reader demographics to genres and modes that are ascribed literary value and serious study. He is, furthermore, thinning the connections to those perceived as prestige-lowering. Suvin's division extends as far as the reading body, with the prestigious possibilities of science fiction being wrapped up in its capacity for cognitive estrangement (cerebral), while the juvenility of fantasy is associated with its thrills (bodily).

ANT provides a valuable perspective to this by not only highlighting the prestige-seeking of significance claims, but also the opposite: the potential for prestige loss if connected to certain other networks. But we should remember that there were those that took sf seriously before Suvin's appeal to the academy to do so, but the attention of such 'networks' lowered external perceptions of the genre's prestige potential. In Yoshinaga's history of the genre, Suvin's institutionalisation of sf—S.F. Studies 1.0—rested on the erasure of earlier culture- and gender- specific communities of practitioners that had developed the form (168). To this effort, the sf fans that spent serious attention and effort on the genre were cast as threats to the field's professionalisation. This is still evident through the caricature of the sf nerd—say, *The Big Bang Theory*'s Sheldon Cooper or *The Simpson*'s Comic Book Guy—bugbearishly patrolling the boundaries of the genre's seriousness through its representation of a ludicrous

seriousness that parodies that of the academic. This may explain why early sf critics so often diverged from their arguments to take potshots at fans. Take, for example, Christine Brooke-Rose's discussion of the *Lord of the Rings*, where she posits that "histories and genealogies [are not] in the least necessary to the narrative, but they have given much infantile happiness to the Tolkien clubs and societies" (247).

Cognitive estrangement, while much criticised and reworked—particularly its 'cognitive' aspect—remains central to sf criticism. Viewing cognitive estrangement through the lens of ANT naturally brings our focus to its prestige-seeking aspect, and an ungenerous reading might simply see 'cognitive' as totem to ward off the Fantastic. As evidenced by the theory's many criticisms and reworkings—Renault, Broderick, Freedman, Spiegel, Miéville, to name a few—it is a burr that is commonly felt. Nonetheless, it has proven hard to fully dislodge, for the simple fact that Suvin has put a name to a phenomenon that we can recognise in our own reading experiences, even if his explication of it is problematic. Or, in that he attempted to fix a problem rather than identify a problematic.

What cognitive practically means to Suvin is the text's ability to attract serious critical consideration and, indeed, reward it: to be 'more than' entertainment. This distrust of the entertaining is set up along almost Cartesian lines, and sf studies are still characterised by a dearth of attention to embodied effects such as the sublime and sense of wonder, and indeed to spectacle (thought the rise of the New Weird and Cli-Fi may be filling this gap). As evidenced by this article, the concept that Suvin here struggled to pin down is a slippery one, stemming from the fact that it is not so much a feature of the text as it is of reading culture, or the text within such a culture. There are, of course, textual features that can more reliably connote that its writer seeks particular types of engagement and appraisal, and that may even reward such attention, but the interpretation of these strategies, and the ability to identify the writer's ethos or attitude, ultimately rests on readers. Suvin's textual focus, combined with

the desire to induct sf into a particular critical space, finds it difficult to grapple with the variability of real readers, particularly, I argue, when these real readers are perceived as holding back the serious appraisal of the genre.

There are, after all, readers and interpretive communities that do not to take any science fiction seriously. Likewise, there are textual strategies which can sublimate certain generic features of sf to make them palatable to such groups, but this does not necessarily make that text more cognitive, merely more amenable to mainstream tastes. And standards for serious attention change, sometimes significantly so. For example, *Arrival*'s talking 'squids' from outer space (film 2016, based on Ted Chiang's 1998 "Story of Your Life"), through the emphasis on the means of their talking, have been taken with great seriousness.

DE-CODIFICATION: SERIOUSNESS AND AUTHORITY

To this point, I have largely focused on the socio-cultural aspect of sf's concerns with seriousness. I want to lead this article towards its conclusion through the *formal* aspect of this relationship, which elevates a history of negotiations to a problematic requiring constant negotiation. What does it mean to be responsible for seriousness: courting it, supporting it, portioning it out?

Returning to Suvin, the convolutions of cognitive estrangement are at least partially an attempt to come to terms with epistemological authority in a way that does not outwardly claim to encourage the mere bowing to it. Hence the clanking cognitive addition to the otherwise well-oiled estrangement. In judging the extrapolations of the text as cognitive or non-cognitive—as considered or careless, as likely, believable, possible or otherwise—there is a thread that eventually leads to epistemological authority. That is, one eventually has to convince oneself or others that these extrapolations are worth paying attention to. In Meyer-Lee's terms, ascribing a value such as authority places the ascriber in a network that both enables and constrains the ascription. Establishing or contesting authority means drawing on

authority: in this case, for example, standards for literariness or seriousness (or credibility, scientificity, morality, etc.).

Of those who have reworked cognitive estrangement, China Miéville is perhaps the most concerned with the danger posed by its potential to encourage readers and critics to pay obeisance to an authorial or formal cognitive authority. He draws attention, then, to a darker side of such negotiations of seriousness, contextualising such fears against middle-brow, bureaucratic utopias, and the trope of the genius engineer hero whose scientific training and rationalist ideology—often represented as good 'ole common-sense—is portrayed as universally applicable, capable of solving problems both scientific and societal, which he relates to "uncomfortably patrician and anti-democratic class politics" (240). As Miéville's argument advances, however, in what seems like attempts to escape the gravity of epistemological authority, he ultimately concedes that a certain 'surrender' of cognitive authority is a necessity of "SF as-form" (240). Sf's rendering of alterity—whether it is past, parallel or future-based—requires an engagement in the consensual, i.e., with other perceptions of the world, with those who might make and inhabit a world, with those that may enact change, or be subject to it. Thus, there is a need to reconceptualise sf's relationship with authority in a way that acknowledges its role in taking things seriously, or not, but does not involve a mere bowing to intellectual vogue or the whims and diktats of authority-wielders and their institutions.

Science, in its abstract form, has often been presented as sf's ultimate authoritative ground or touchstone. But science's role in sf has always been circumscribed, even if the boundaries have been mercurial. Rieder, building on Miéville's argument, also takes aim at the use of science as a means of courting serious attention, and the repercussions of endowing sf's speculations with its perceived authority. Miéville describes the claim that sf is based on science and rationality as really being "capitalist modernity's ideologically projected self-

justification: not some abstract/ideal 'science', but capitalist science's bullshit about itself" (240). Rieder echoes this in *Speculative Epistemologies*, arguing that, in such claims, capitalism becomes conflated with science and thus endowed with the reality and truth claims of science: "Plots of exploration, pioneering, the subjugation of 'nature' to 'civilization' and a future of endless economic growth and geographic expansion are the stuff of colonial-capitalist ideology rather than of scientific discourse" (103).

We can see this dialectic in critical reactions to Tom Godwin's "The Cold Equations"—whose equations concern whether a female stowaway 'must' be ejected from the ship. Gunn celebrates the story as quintessential sf, whereas Vint and Bould explicate it—and Gunn's reading—as tying the identity of sf to capitalism, colonialism and masculinity, using the foil of the silly, sentimental female to show what must be 'ejected' from the field. In this rendering of the genre, plausibility and scientificity are connoted by a grim world and dim expectations for the humans populating it. Again, the cultivation of seriousness through such tropes has long been commented upon. Moore, a contemporary of Godwin's, complained in 1957, of the "Gloom School" that inevitably kills its heroes so that its readers do not 'confuse' sf with "Kid's stuff" (182).

Ultimately, Miéville and Rieder argue their points in support of expanding the boundaries of sf's serious attention. For Miéville, fantasy must be reclaimed as a 'site of cognition,' and a reckoning made with the damage done to it and sf (or together as fictions of alterity) by the strangulation of Suvin's 'cognitive.' Not only has this starved fantasy of serious attention, he argues, but it has codified sf's ways of seeking, receiving and rewarding serious attention in ways that wed it to dangerous ideals of authority. Rieder likewise expands sf's epistemologies—ways of knowing—to consider a series of texts outside what, to stricter considerers, might be considered sf. This involves, for example, his project of reading Indigenous fiction as sf, which requires a shift of what traditional sf interpretive stances

might understand as science, and thus what can be considered a serious epistemological foundation to imagine a future (or simply a different way of being in the present).

In relation to alternative ways of engaging with authority, Miéville represents the reading of an sf text as requiring a kind of ludic contract between the author and the reader. He describes this as "game-like," underscoring the consensual aspect of this appeal to authority (238). This ludic approach strikes not just at the problem, but at the problematic of seriousness, and may prove effective at joining the common-sense, folk-understanding of sf with a critical understand of authority and what is deemed 'properly' cognitive. It is perhaps more generative to understand the genre's engagement with authority in this way, a presentation of a particular gameboard, and associated pieces, that the reader may sit down to, with the suggested rules or their own. Thus, we have a route towards understanding seriousness as something that is engaged with, granted, entertained, revoked, contested, and so on. Moreover, this is a specifically literary understanding of the genre, that gives space to readers approaching sf's literary worlds as literary worlds, rather than as edutainment.

IN CONCLUSION, INTERPRETING WITH SERIOUSNESS

My overall hope for this article is to provide a framework to help explain how the reading, writing, and discussing of the genre, and its effect, are affected by concerns with seriousness. Closing with Miéville and Rieder's engagement with authority points to the fact that understanding this does not 'free' us from concerns with seriousness, even if these concerns have significantly shifted. As readers and critics, we will always have to take heed of some aspect(s) of seriousness in order to take account of what we might call the worth/investment dialectic, which is inextricably entwined with our ideals for both sf and wider literature. And investment is not merely the time it takes to read the text but the resources we allot it, interpretive and otherwise, in for example, critical attention, 'canonisation', platforming, teaching, celebrating, etc.

Thus, we must understand seriousness as a *problematic*: a series of changing yet constant problems. Despite this nature, we can still take a more critical eye to it, one trained to anatomise the concept, to reveal the many different concerns that variously make up the negotiation of it, and the personal, professional and cultural contexts of those concerns. This understanding should inform our analyses of how and why readers and interpretive communities use different ideals of seriousness in their reading, of how such understandings can significantly affect the type of interpretations, and interpretive efforts, that may be marshalled to a text. Indeed, these concerns should also draw our attention to the means by which interlocutors—whether fans, editors, readers, writers, or critics—cultivate seriousness, and the effect that this has on expectations for not just sf, but larger ideals of knowledge, and authority and, most distinctly for the genre, the future.

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