

# Worlds of Our Making in Science Fiction and International Relations

Written by Nicholas J. Kiersey and Iver B. Neumann

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### Cultural 'Artefacts'

A growing number of scholars are studying the importance of cultural artefacts – popular or otherwise – for the phenomena that make up the core of our discipline (for a range of different approaches, see Weldes 2003; Franklin 2005; Devetak 2006; Nexon & Neumann 2006; and Weber 2013). Following the pioneering efforts of Michael Shapiro (1981, 1988) over the last thirty years, much of this work within IR is premised on the idea that cultural artefacts are immanent to a general social grammar. Popular culture is interesting to IR theorists insofar as it can naturalise or normalise a certain social order by entrenching the expectations of social behaviour upon which dominant ideologies of foreign policy are founded. In this sense, normalisation is a form of power. We agree with Cynthia Weber that the myths and 'unconscious ideologies' of fictional universes serve as silent, sub-textual pillars of the real. Gestures of naturalisation are phenomena of political power, insofar as such power 'works through myths by appearing to take the political out of the ideological' (Weber 2013, p. 7).

Yet it is also the case that artefacts can be invariance-bursting, that is, they can put an end to sameness and challenge aspects of the social world that we might otherwise take for granted. Approaching the question of normalisation from a Marxist perspective, for example, China Miéville argues that the imaginative differences afforded science fiction and even fantasy narratives can be disruptive, too. As he suggests, 'fantasy is a mode that, in constructing an internally coherent but actually impossible totality – constructed on the basis that the impossible is, for this work, *true* – mimics the absurdity of capitalist modernity' (2002, p. 42). The finer points of debating capitalism aside, the point here is that fictional stories can, and often do, contain scenarios where the protagonists engage in redefinition and transformation of their regime. Disruption occurs when, as consumers of these scenarios, we discover that we can reason by analogy back to the grotesque fantasies of our own world, distancing us from the expectation that things will always necessarily be as they are.

### Artefacts and Genre

In order to be relevant to the theorist of International Relations, readings of artefacts have to focus not only on the political order on display in the artefact itself, what we might call the 'in-show' political order (that is, inside the world the artefact attempts to create), but also on in-world political orders. Relations between in-world reality and in-show orders will, among other things, depend on genre. Genre carries with it its own memory. When we attend a rock concert, we have expectations about what kind of political commentary, if any, we will hear. Those expectations will grow out of certain characteristics of the genre. And they will be different from, say, those that envelop our consumption of a stand-up comedy show or those we have when we watch a TV show. Such expectations will be stronger the better we know the genre, so fans will be particularly attuned to them. By the same token, our expectations about genre convention will frame our consumption of a sit-com as substantively different from a space opera like *Battlestar Galactica*, say, or *Star Wars*.

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Taking this broad array of artefacts seriously, then, as artefacts proper to the literary genre of science fiction, the question becomes one of how consumer expectations are subject, among other things, to the expectations generated by the conventions of this genre. Following Cultural Studies theorists like Darko Suvin, we recognise that science fiction 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' (Suvin, cited in Freedman 2000, p. 16). The term 'estrangement' (Rus. *ostranenie*), coined originally a century ago by Russian formalist Shklovsky, is that which gives the text the power, implicitly or explicitly, to give the reader over to a sense of the possibility of another reality. By contrast, 'cognition' refers to that which enables the text to rationally account for the way this alternative reality actually works. It performs this operation by posing explicit differences between the inner workings of its narrative world and those of our own.

As Freedman (2000) stresses, however, operations of estrangement are not in and of themselves all that politically significant. Texts orientated more towards estrangement, such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, can be read for all intents and purposes as fantasy. Texts that focus more on cognition, on the other hand, tend towards realism at the expense of imaginative difference, thus potentially stretching the limits of the genre too far in the opposite direction. For this reason, as Freedman cautions, the exact parameters of science fiction as a genre are somewhat difficult to nail down. For Freedman, what is essential ultimately is the 'cognition effect', that is, 'the attitude of the text itself to the kind of estrangements being performed' (Freedman 2000, 18, emphasis in original). Thus, even though actual science may someday supersede the cognitively rational elements of a particular science fiction text, it should remain a part of the genre because the author originally understood what he or she was writing to have a potential cognitive validity. On this account, a definition of the genre would necessarily exclude *The Lord of the Rings*, but it would feasibly include the more traditional estrangement-centric 'pulp' of Hugo Gernsback's 1929 *Amazing Stories*, of which *Star Wars* would naturally be considered a contemporary exemplar.

For the sake of precision, however, we might want to narrow this definition down a little. By the time Shklovsky came up with the term 'estrangement', the idea that alternative realities were not only part of literature's remit, but one of literature's defining traits, was already firmly ensconced. A romantic such as Coleridge defined poetry in terms of a willing suspension of disbelief. Thomas More's *Utopia* was first published in 1516. Indeed, taking into consideration that older literary traditions are basically part of religious traditions, and noting that religion is a social phenomenon that by definition operates with more than one reality – there is the profane and visible reality, and then there are one or more alternate realities – we would argue that the existence of what Suvin refers to as 'an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment' is the historical literary rule. It was only with the coming of modernity that the possibility of a wholly disenchanting literature emerged. In light of this, the oft-heard throwaway line that all literature is science fiction cannot be written off without argument.

In order to refute the idea that all literature is science fiction, we would turn to another defining trait of modernity, namely the acceleration of technological innovation. It is, after all, the 'science' in science fiction, understood as technological innovation, that points to its characteristic type of cognition, not the 'fiction'. By Freedman's logic, there is no reason to exclude the more realist mode of making strange (Ger. *Verfremdungseffekt*) of Berthold Brecht's *Mother Courage and The Good Person of Szechwan* (Freedman 2000, p. 22). For us, this risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Freedman is right to try to relax Suvin's definition, but we are hesitant to include such writings within the genre of science fiction because the topic of science, in the sense of the existence of advanced technology and/or technology differentials, is not on display in these works. Suvin after all, following the philosopher Ernst Bloch, insists on the importance of the so-called 'novum' (1976), i.e. a technological device whose existence and way of functioning is unknown in the reader's universe or, at the very least, in the universe of some of the main characters. With respect to Freedman, then, we would underline that, at least for routine usage, scholars not lose sight of the dimension of estrangement in their understanding of the genre.

## IR and Science Fiction

Studies of science fiction in IR have, to date, focused their attention on more traditional examples of science fiction, whether in written or televisual form (see Weldes 2003, 1999; and Buzan 2010). Principally, they have been interested in the extent to which the estrangements of science fiction have performed normalising functions on the

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cognitive side. That is, they have examined the ways in which the technologised 'new worlds' of science fiction often retain and repeat elements of the world we already live in, and which we can recognise as such. These themes have a long history in literary traditions, for example in the way self-professed surrealist writers claimed to be more realistic in their representations of the world. Weldes avails herself of the term 'intertext', coined by French-Bulgarian social theorist Julia Kristeva in the 1960s, to describe this tendency for energetic crossing back and forth between science fiction texts and our own world. As she notes, 'SF texts repeat and rework generic conventions, and readers bring knowledge of these conventions, their generic expectations, to their consumption and appreciation of any particular text' (Weldes 2003, p. 13). Such repetitions thus bespeak the reflexivity of science fiction and, as such, its potentially constitutive role in world politics, alerting us to the diverse ways in which the 'real' world in which we actually live is itself a produced, textual affair. Importantly, these repetitions are a necessary and vital element in making a work of popular fiction recognisable, and therefore capable of grabbing and sustaining the attention of an audience.

Beyond this, however, to the extent that these generic conventions might be unconsciously held, they can also function as socially powerful 'myths', guiding expectations of what is normal and abnormal in the social world (see Nexon and Neumann 2006). By studying these homologues or elements of redundancy between the fictional and the real, IR theorists thus hope to get a sense of what these shared – and often hidden or, at least, not overtly stated – conventions and expectations are, and what outcomes they may enable or prevent.

IR theorists differ to some extent on the relative 'separateness' of the cultural artefact and the world that produces it. For some, since the artefact is an effect of the social, it is a worthy object of study in and of itself; there is no need to separate in-show and in-world, for they are both part of the same general text (Shapiro 1981, 1988). Nor is there a need to separate between genre, for all genres are part of the same general text (for a critique of such views, see Carter and Dodds 2011). By this token, studying a popular culture artefact is already studying our own in-world reality, for the popular culture artefact springs from the same general grammar as does any other social phenomenon. This structuralist approach, where the cohesion of the world is somehow guaranteed by an underlying latent grammatical structure, is also widespread within Cultural Studies.

For our part, and contra Shapiro, we tend to see these worlds as being quite distinct. Like sundry post-structuralists, we do not believe that there is such a thing as a latent structure that guarantees the unity of our worlds. Indeed, we follow Shakespeare scholar Stephen Greenblatt's (1988) lead in thinking about this process as an exchange of social energies – or a circulation of representations – where the social delivers the raw material out of which cultural artefacts are made, and cultural artefacts in turn rarefy the social. Greenblatt illustrates his key point by investigating circulation on a number of levels. For example, when King Lear was originally staged, Lear's decision to divide his kingdom into three would have created an immediate and shocked response, since contemporaneity was in the throes of similar divisions and unifications following the Tudor wars. On a more quotidian level, costumes would mark certain actors as hailing from certain classes and would be very similar to clothes used by members of the audience, making for a certain sartorial identification. One particularly pithy example of circulation given by Greenblatt concerns how a member of the audience, in response to something that was said by one of the actors, stormed the stage and killed said actor.

While these two approaches differ greatly as to the hows and whys of studying popular culture, they share a starting point in seeing popular culture as a precondition for action. However, our approach has its forerunners within political science, where, following early efforts by Murray Edelman (e.g. 1995), certain scholars see the study of cultural artefacts as a stepping-stone to understanding political outcomes. Popular culture shapes how constituencies understand the world. Since public worldviews are one of the factors constraining what politicians can do and at what cost, the popular cultural artefacts that contribute to shaping them are indirectly important to political outcomes. For example, this seems to be the underlying way of thinking when Lisa Wedeen argues that work on popular culture may 'show how a critical understanding of culture as practices of meaning-making facilitates insights about politics, enabling political scientists to produce sophisticated causal arguments and to treat forms of evidence that, while manifestly political, most political science approaches tend to overlook' (2002, p. 714).

In this regard, we premise our work on a critical tradition stretching from Russian literary historian Mikhail Bakhtin to contemporaries like David Lodge and Julia Kristeva, and begin with the idea that there is an intertext between

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cultural artefacts and social life. Bakhtin's central example is the carnival, which works as a play without a scene; performance and social life meet, mingle and mix in such a degree that the one may be analysed in terms of the other and vice versa. Note that, far from being considered part of the same structure, Bakhtin (1984) considers cultural artefacts and social life to be different phenomena and reserves his focus for the relations *between* them. Intertexts must therefore be studied in their specificity; it is not satisfactory simply to postulate that there exists some latent structure that secures homology between a certain social world and a certain cultural artefact. Rather than postulating it as an *a priori*, empirical work is needed to demonstrate that such an intertext actually exists, because of this and that precondition, and with this or that effect.

As scholars, then, what we are looking for are specific instances where we might see a circulation of socially constitutive energies between artefacts of science fiction and our own social world. By energies we mean the pent-up social charges created by human interest in, and engagement with, any number of social phenomena that have come to be seen as problematic; but energies do not emerge if something is not seen as a challenge or a problem. For example, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a plethora of home-grown terrorist acts perpetrated by underground groups such as the Weathermen hit the United States. These events certainly created a spark in police activity, but they did not create much energy, because terrorism on American soil was not considered a public problem. Compare that with the situation post-9/11. Today, the merest rumour of an attack may set off a widely publicised alert system and spark waves of emotional energy. This change can be observed in science fiction culture, too.

Contrast, for example, the original 1970s version of *Battlestar Galactica*, or even the original *Star Wars* series, which did not feature terrorist attacks. If they had, the potential for creating a sensation would have been low, for there were no social energies to spark. By contrast, the reimagined *Battlestar* of 2004 chose to open the show with the portrayal of a series of all-out terrorist attacks. Similarly, the latter two episodes of the recent *Star Wars* 'prequels' (of 2002 and 2005) featured extensive scenes of parliamentary debate and intrigue surrounding the suspension of the Republic's 'Constitution' in the midst of a terror campaign. In this way, the post-9/11 world certainly sported the social energy for there to be an immediate circulation between what we may call in-artefact and in-world realities.

## Conclusion

One of the great virtues of science fiction is its ability to pose fictional worlds that, while cognitively coherent on their own unique terms, nevertheless inevitably maintain a link with the experiences we share in our own world. *Star Wars* and *Battlestar Galactica* are certainly part of our world, in the sense that they are artefacts that belong to this world. The ontic quality of our first-hand world, where three-dimensional organic humans interact according to countless more-or-less tightly scripted narratives, makes for an emergent reality that is different from the represented second-order world created in these artefacts. Despite the difference in ontic status, however, second-order science fiction narratives have the potential to model first-order political dilemmas and outcomes, disrupting and redirecting the political hopes and dreams of our own 'real world'. We put 'real world' between inverted commas here in order to underline how, whatever their ontic status, second-order worlds are unquestionably parts of our own reality. But we should be careful when folding these objects of analyses back into the social fabric that produced them. Against the idea that a general grammar warrants studying popular culture on a par with first-order realities, we hold that similarities and dissimilarities have to be specified in as much detail as possible.

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