SOME NOTES ON THE STYLE OF SCIENCE FICTION

Science Fiction is a controlled way to think and dream about future. An integration of the mood and attitude of science (the objective universe) with the fears and hopes that spring from the unconscious. Anything that turns you and your social context, the social you, inside out. Nightmares and visions, always outlined by the barely possible.

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The last decade of the 20th century and the start of the 21st have been marked with the emergence of a number of new forms of communicating information which confront the academic community and challenge more conventional perspectives in linguistics. In addition to numerous innovative approaches to education, the status quo in the context of English Studies has been greatly changed too. Considering the two factors (modern technologies and reformation in education) new sources of investigating English language which have traditionally been neglected should be and are being focused on. The unique genre of Science Fiction (abbreviated SF or sci-fi) is one of the so-called neglected genres that has long been ignored by many English departments as it was not considered serious fiction worthy of scholarly study. Professionals in the fields of linguistics and literary criticism tended to ignore the genre and its analysis was left to the fans. Moreover, many written works where the tendency of science fiction is strongest have rarely received stylistic commendation, canonical hostility to science fiction has often justified itself on specifically stylistic grounds (Freedman C.H., 2000). However, this most thoughtful and imaginative literary fiction deserves more attention of linguists and educationalists as it has already offered compelling evidence that it represents and provides historical, cultural, socio-political communicative insights and is a rich source of linguistic study.

SF is a broad genre of fiction which, besides its classical written form of short stories and novels, is found in everyday communication of people, art, television, films, the Internet, cartoons, comic strips, computer games and other media. In a sense SF seems to be concerned with engineering and hard sciences such as physics, astronomy, chemistry (Hard SF) but in fact it is mostly based on soft sciences and especially the social sciences such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, political science (Soft SF or Social SF) thus being more concerned with society, different human groups, circumstances, ideas, themes and emotions
that are not centrally tied to scientific-technological or engineering speculations. The aesthetic part of it is coexistent with the profoundly, ideologically informative side. The social, mental, moral and psychological notion is so clearly expressed in the literary tradition of SF that it is sometimes regarded as Literature of Cognitive Estrangement. This is because all humans and human groups tend to see themselves in the center of the world, different from anybody else and unique. This root notion of Us is a basis for comparison allowing us to become conscious of who we are as opposed to one or more Them (Kraus E., 1997). Thus, the discourse of SF is connected to the central concerns of the society, human problems and solutions and has a social and intellectual function. The rational, intellectual content and social and emotive functions are equally essential elements for this “smart” fiction.

During the short history of existence (from its Early Formative Years and Golden Age of 1937 to the New Wave in 1960s, the Second Golden Age and flourishing Feminist Science Fiction in late 60s and 70s, Cyberpunk Movement in 80s and Ribofunk since 1990s), English language SF has for decades imagined encounters with the alien, thanks to hypothetical technologies that transport us through space and time, alternative history, alternate or parallel worlds, thought experiments in physiology, psychology, sociology and other sciences, experimental model of society. It is a rational + visional/fantastic writing about alternate possibilities in settings that are contrary to known reality. The settings of imaginary worlds or imaginary extension to our own world refer:

- to the future of the Earth, the Universe and mankind,
- to our historical past contradicting known historiographical facts or archeological record,
- to the outer galaxies and aliens,
- to phenomena contradicting known facts or supposed laws of nature,
- to discovering and applying new scientific principles and words born and popularized not by science but by SF (time-travel, biotechnology, nanotechnology, parapsychology, spacesuits, robots, mutants, ciborgs, morph, empath, force-field, web cast etc)
- to founding new, different and more fair political or social systems.

These settings help further separate the genre of SF from a sense of reality as the unreal is seen as a product solely of the imagination and fantasy. Exploring in logical but creative language the consequences of functioning of such unreal settings is the traditional purpose of SF clearly separating it from other discourse types and genres of fiction and making it wildly popular among young and adult readers thus increasing cognition and literacy rates worldwide.

Theoretical discussions on SF so far have articulated the urgent need to define this broad literary genre. But the fact is that SF hasn’t had a neat, final definition so far. The common view is that a fixed definition may draw SF
towards a mere limitation to formula. The general approach is to consider it an art dependent of intellect: speculative fiction, imaginary science, scientific romance, storytelling about future, technology of emotions, as named by SF writers and analysts. Art is specifically used to support the cognitive reflection in science, in a wider sense art and cognition are intimately associated. Therefore, science is the frame and the fantasy and visions of the author are the content of SF. Sometimes SF is proclaimed to be “the mythology of the modern world” (LeGuin U.K., 1993) and this approach can be well justified: although SF began to emerge with the development of science itself, as a means of understanding the world through speculation and storytelling, it really has antecedents back to mythology. SF commonly uses techniques both from the realistic and the fantastic traditions of narrative to tell a story of which a referent, implicit or explicit, is the mythos of modern world (described as a virtual world) and can educate the imagination beyond the constraints of mainstream mindsets. SF is also qualified as “a modern fairy tale”. As in fairy tales and mythology the discourses of narration and description play an important role in it. And as in fairy tales and mythology the origin of the imagery, the motive of the narrative is to be found in the contents, assumptions and views of the present world. At this juncture, it should be stressed that the stylistic device of literalization of metaphor is realized exceptionally in fairy tales and SF and like in fairy tales of all nations, Evil is always defeated here.

In examining SF it is essential to begin with the specifically stylistic dimension of it. Style is widely taken to be a privileged category in the analysis of any literary kind, a kind of touchstone of the literary itself and it is especially relevant to the study of SF (Freedman C.H., 2000), a new, non-traditional language phenomenon. “SF works differently from other written categories, particularly those categories traditionally called literary. It works the same way only in that, like all categories of writing, it has its specific conventions, unique focuses, areas of interest and excellence, as well as its own particular ways of making sense out of language. To ignore any of these constitutes a major misreading – an obliviousness to the play of meanings that make up the SF text”, declared the famous SF writer and analyst Samuel R. Delany (Delany S.R., 1977). In the light of this point, it should be noted that an appropriate SF protocol implies adherence to certain linguistic technique and stylistic rules typical of the discipline. The imaginative answer to the question “What would happen if?”, which is central to SF, conditions its style which includes common technical terms, plentiful use of invented technical terms, a host of invented future scientific jargon, a whole series of military, artistic, linguistic (alternative, artificial languages) and everyday neologisms and coinages, fantastic metaphors, epithets and many other linguistic and stylistic means. These language units sound convincing both due to the author’s preliminary knowledge of sciences and scientific literature and his skill and knowledge as a professional philologist.
who has an abiding respect for the English language, who is well aware of principles of using stylistic tools and coinages, who reminds the readers “what great potential there is in overhauling verbs, creating slang, and assaulting the senses with vivid descriptions” (Myer T., 1997). Viewed in the light of this attitude and the belief underlying this stance, it should be mentioned that the SF vocabulary is largely self-contained; certain terms tend to occur nowhere else, while, say, newspaper language may be found in all the other styles. The researcher linguists must be at least a little computer literate to be able to analyze the words and the fans must be at least a little academically/linguistically oriented to uncover SF meanings and enjoy them.

The points discussed so far reveal that the precise language characteristic of a genre is realized through the style and even the analysis of one or a couple of pieces of SF story may illustrate many peculiarities concerning the style of the genre.

The first (opening the story) and the following passage below are pieces from the cyberpunk story by Paul Di Filippo “Stone Lives” published in “The Cyberpunk Anthology” (ed. Bruce Sterling. NY: Arbour House, 1986).

Odors boil around the Immigration office, a stench soup. The sweat of desperate men and women, ripe garbage strewn in the packed street, the spicy scent worn by one of guards at the outer door. The mix is heavy, almost overpowering to anyone born outside the Bungle, but Stone is used to it. The constant smells constitute the only atmosphere he has ever known, his native element, too familiar to be despised. Noise swells to rival the stench: harsh voices raised in dispute, whining voices lowered to entreat. “Don’t shiff me, you rottv bastard!” “I’d treat you real nice, honey, for a share of that”. From the vicinity of the door into immigration, an artificial voice reciting the day’s job offerings, cycling tirelessly through the rotty choices. “— to test new aerosol antipersonnel toxins: 4M will contract to provide survivors with a Citrine rejuve. High-orbit vakheads needed by McDonel Douglas. Must be willing to be imprinted —” (p.178)

June’s body is a tracery of lambent lines, like some arcane capillary circuitry in the core of Mao/Kung Fu-tzu. Following the current craze, she has had a subdermal pattern of microchannels implanted. The channels are filled with synthetic lucifirase, the biochemical responsible for the glow of fireflies, which she can trigger now at will. In the afterglow of lovemaking, she has set herself alight (p.194)

The opening passage could of course be the straightforward opening of a mundane story or a novel, that is, a piece of writing in which the generic tendency of science fiction is reduced to the barest minimum: a crowd of men and women living in misery and poverty desperately tying to find a job or leave their underdeveloped, poor native land. The stylistic register of the paragraph, however, marks it unmistakably SF. The key factor here is the mood or
The sentences in the second passage are more flexible, sinuous, complex than those in the first one as they have got more style. Yet, there is a real danger in misinterpreting their metaphorical codes. The opening sentence of the second passage through an oriental sounding name alludes to June’s Vietnamese origin. The second sentence reminds the reader that no matter how normal things may appear in a piece of SF (Following the current craze, she has had a subdermal pattern of microchannels implanted), you can always expect some punk to pop into the scene with the lucifirase, a good example of a newly coined SF term. The verb trigger is used in a sense other than the expected metaphorical on as it is applied to turning on the glow of the body. The passage gradually becomes more effective: starts out normally grounded (implantations are quite common today), then becomes typically science fictional with the heroine turning the lights of her body on at will and reaches a climax exemplified in the stylistic device of literalization of metaphor which, as mentioned above is a typical characteristic of only SF and fairy tales. The metaphor is expressed in she has set herself alight, which, in other discourses would be associated with passion but in the SF content, in addition to symbolizing love, has been literalized, i.e. the heroine has in fact turned on the lucifirase matter filling her subdermal microchannels and made her body luminous.

Literalization of metaphor exemplifies what I believe to be a significant stylistic marker for SF. We come across many examples of this tool in the story. Stone is a living camera, when he still retained his eyes, don’t take the eyes back, please, warm laser fingers, practicing his new eyes, unequipped with his damned perceptive eyes, his eyes go dead. Through this highly important marker SF signals not only its stylistic uniqueness but the difference between the present and future as well.
One more point in connection with the investigation of the style of the story must be emphasized. It is the title of the story, the hero’s only name which sounds completely mundane until the final part of the story when he turns out to be a clone specially brought up in Bungle to become tough, hard and durable as stone to be able to change the beautiful, gaudy, exciting, noble-sounding but unfair 22nd century hi-tech urban world founded by his mother, Alice Citrine. Through the extended metaphor *Stone lives* and a final genuine metaphor *clean up the mess* (change the world for the better) the author expresses his optimistic striving for a radical social change and victory over technological and political dominance. This optimism is not just individual attitude; rather, it is directly based on specificities of present life of mankind, on collective human intellect and experience expressed in a cyberpunk dynamism. Indeed, we may go so far as to say that stylistically SF is of all genres the most devoted to humanism and the humanity.

SF is developing and booming today as the penetration of science and new technology into society has created a deep interest in English literature exploring technologies which influence the global society. Today Anglo-American SF is represented in all varieties of advanced communication. Words coined in science fiction have become part of the vocabulary of any number of subcultures and endeavors, from comics, to neo-paganism, to aerospace, to computers, to environmentalism, to zine culture, to politics. SF has significant impact upon the behavior of individuals in the society, world culture, thought, education and English language.

In conclusion it should be said that investigation of a discourse is part of the inflationary process by which genres survive, endure, propagate. SF with its panoply of luminous and vivid worlds, lies in all its potential to be explored by linguists.

Notes:

1. According to American linguists and educationalists national ethnocentrism, strongly reinforced since the middle decades of the 20th century by World War II and the Cold War, expected literature as taught at schools and universities to promote a sense of national identity and greatness. Genres of writing which did not readily serve such ends (Autobiographies, Diaries, Essays, Detective Fiction and Science Fiction) tended to be neglected as “inferior” (Kraus F. 1997).

2. As the world evolves gradually from the concept of ethnocentrism, we in the early 21st century are learning by rediscovering new and formerly neglected genres of writing and drawing on them for teaching materials. Such choices are likely to engage students more immediately than the traditional ones. Essay writing is considered to be a good example of a genre completely neglected at the English Department at Yerevan State University. But at present it plays a key role in the Writing Course of the Department.
3. A great deal of SF goes beyond escapism – in order to inspire new visions for the recreation of the present society.


5. Such ideas or images which long ago abandoned fiction to enjoy tremendous vitality as "icons" of modern SF and common elements of the global culture can be infinitely reused. The term "icon" in this sense was first used by Professor Garry K.Wolfe. (Wolfe G.K. 1979). The first historical dictionary devoted to science fiction Brave New Words: The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction (2007) edited by Jeff Prucher covers science-fictional words and their associated concepts. It also shows how many words we consider everyday vocabulary had their roots in SF. In addition, the full citations and bibliographic information document the SF vocabulary transfer into other subcultures or mainstream English.

References: