

Learning from Science Fiction

Brian McHale,
Department of English
The Ohio State University
mchale.11@osu.edu

OSU Science Café,
7 January 2009

Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science
Fiction*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979

“the *novum*”

“True moral fiction is an experiment too difficult
and dangerous to try in the world, but safe and
important in the mirror image of reality in the
writer’s mind.”

-- John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (1978)

Catherine Z. Elgin, “The Laboratory of the Mind,”
in *A Sense of the World*, edited by John Gibson,
Wolfgang Huemer and Luca Poggi, 2007.

Terry Cochran, “The Knowing of Literature,” *New
Literary History* 38,1 (Winter 2007).

“... literature ... has been stripped of its powers to
evoke the unknown, the unknowable, the
unforeseen, or even the unthinkable.”

-- Terry Cochran, “The Knowing of Literature”

“The planner, the builder of castles in the air, the
novelist, the author of social and technological
utopias is experimenting with thoughts; so, too, is
the respectable businessman, the serious inventor
and the researcher. All of them imagine
conditions, and connect with them their
expectations and conjecture certain consequences:
they perform a thought experiment.”

-- Ernst Mach (1906), quoted in Cochran, “The
Knowing of Literature” (2007)

“Schrödinger's cat, locked in a fictional box, eternally both dead and living, may allow for thinking the consequences of relativity theory, but it is above all a work of literature, modest in length but powerful in suggestiveness.”

-- Cochran, “The Knowing of Literature” (2007)

“cognitive estrangement”

--Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*

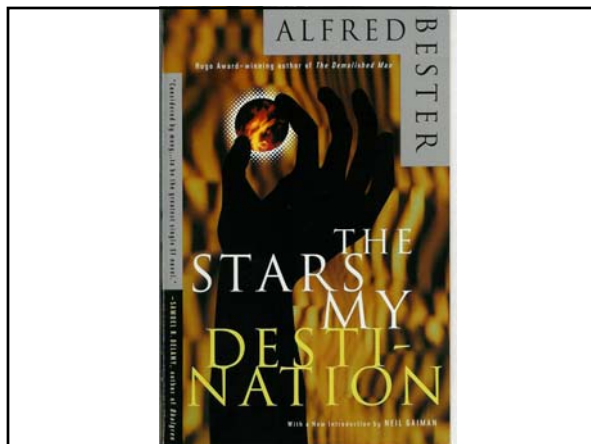
“... you can read [this book], and a lot of other science fiction, as a thought experiment The purpose of a thought experiment ... is not to predict the future ... but to describe reality, the present world.”

--Ursula LeGuin, Introduction (1976) to *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969)

Ward Moore, *Bring the Jubilee* (1953)

Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle* (1962)

William Gibson & Bruce Sterling, *The Difference Engine* (1991)



“space-time compression”

-- David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry in the Origins of Cultural Change* (1989)

A historian [who] ... had been a great reader of literature ... had found, over a period of five or six years, that he was reading more and more science fiction until, for the last two years, other than his journals and nonfiction he read nothing else. "I was afraid to go back and read a 'serious' novel," he told me. "I didn't know what would happen. Finally, in fear and trembling, I picked up Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, always one of my favorites, just to see what happened when I did I thoroughly enjoyed it. But I realized something. Before, I used to read novels to tell me how the world really was at the time they were written. This time, I read the book asking myself what kind of world would have had to exist for Austen's story to have taken place – which, incidentally, is completely different from the world as it actually was back then"As far as I can tell, this man has started to read Austen as if her novels were science fiction.

--Samuel R. Delany, "Science Fiction and 'Literature' – or, The Conscience of the King," in *Starboard Wine* (1984)