



DARKO SUVIN

POSITIONS AND PRESUPPOSITIONS IN

SCIENCE FICTION

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FICTION

By the same author

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Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction

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*To Ivan V. Lalić and the memory of Vojo Kuzmanović – friends and
SF swappers from the archaic torso of Zagreb in the 1950s, our
socialist youth*

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Preface

All one can do, without too many illusions about success, is to speak what has been cognized, and for the rest to work in the professional musical domain toward the instauration of a proper and cognitive relationship to its object instead of an ideological consumption. The latter can be countered only by fragmented models of a relation to music, and of a music itself, that would be different.

(Adorno, *Einleitung*, p. 81)

0. As usual, the Preface is written last. Furthermore, it is being composed in an economic situation where I have about two days' time and 2000 words for it. In such straits, I must content myself with briefly asking and articulating a few questions. Two to begin with: Where does this book come from? How does it hang together?

1. Its title was chosen to suggest that this book is unified by an endeavour to both clarify and develop the theoretical and historical conclusions reached in my first two books on SF, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (1979) and *Victorian Science Fiction in the UK: The Discourses of Knowledge and of Power* (1983), as well as to record an implicit dialogue I carried on about their achievements and lacunae with the collaborators and readers of the journal I co-edited from 1973 to 1981, *Science-Fiction Studies*.¹ The positions indicated in the above subtitles, advancing from a stress on genre poetics as developing in history to one on discourses of identifiable social groups about their disputed values, are presuppositions for this book. They are developed in a double set of further presuppositions isolated as Part I of this book, and answering the questions (1) 'Why discuss paraliterature?' and (2) 'Why SF?'

Indeed, why? Isn't the study of great world fiction, from the *Book of the Odes* to today's Latin Americans, not only too immense for however busy a lifetime but also chock-full of the sublime emotional cognitions that ought to satisfy anybody with such interests? Yes, it is; and I suspect fans who never read anything but SF are poor people and poor appreciators of SF to boot. Yet Eliot's or Lukács's classicist idea of a great tradition of masterpieces calls to my mind

the historical semantics of 'classic' – that pertaining to the highest class of value as defined by the highest class of master-people (itself first defined by King Servius Tullius's division of the Roman population into military-cum-economic social classes). Not that I dispute the existence of value-classes; on the contrary, this book is a sustained wrestle with defining and redefining them. But I find the historical practice of masterpieces limited by individualism and elitism. Should cultural investigation accept as defining category *and value* the market fact of publishing stories in book-volumes? I doubt this: the basic slicing up of the world of culture is some complex grouping of books into macro-texts. Obversely, the historical choice among book-titles is challenged by democracy: all the individual texts are, so to speak, God's chillun and got wings; they have an at least potential dignity of their own (and if they squander it they are answerable for it); and they ought to be considered (as somebody said of ascending Mt Everest) because they are there. Paraliterature, too, exists – indeed it is the new majority. Once upon a time the *Book of Odes* songs were peasant ditties, Shakespeare performed for groundlings, and Brecht played in cabaret. But more important, the basic materialist curiosity is also oriented toward values. My central argument has always been that SF is defined by its estranged techniques of presenting a cognitive novum. Surely we badly need all orts and scraps of true novelty to be found in our terrible and fertile times? Shouldn't we carefully look them up, examine and circulate them?

The second question 'Why SF?', then, means for me primarily 'How do I think one should approach SF?' Let me answer this by transcribing in the next three paragraphs the speech I sent to the SF Research Association when it gave me its annual Pilgrim Award:

From my earliest reading of Verne, Wells, Thomas More and the Groff Conklin anthologies which circulated from hand to hand in postwar Yugoslavia, I have, as a socialist, been fascinated by the 'it ain't necessarily so' aspect of SF – which, for me, does not start with Gernsback, Verne or even Shelley, but with the universal legends of Earthly Paradise and the Promethean impulse toward a knowledge to be wedded to self-governing happiness on this Earth. Of course, this embraces also all the narrations which deal with analogues to such radically new relationships among people – however narratively estranged into other worlds and other figures such relationships might be, for the good and sufficient reason that one needs a complex optical system in order to see oneself. Bearing in

mind that every SF narration is a dialogue with the reader here and now, this also embraces all the stories that deal with radically worse relationships than the reader knows, since his/her reaction to such stories – by the rule of minus times minus makes plus or of negating the negation – recuperates these new maps of hell for the positive vision.

Looking back upon my criticism of SF, it seems to me that I have tried to mimic in it this stubbornly contrary and contesting backbone of the narrations I was writing about. I have contested Henry Ford's saying 'History is bunk', and tried to persuade my readers that an understanding of the living, even if subterranean, traditions of the past is the only way to give the present a chance of evolving into a tolerable future. I have contested the saying, whose equally immortalizable author I forget at the moment, 'SF is what I mean when I point at some books', and tried to persuade my readers that any general statements about SF have to be a negotiation between empirical evidence and logically as well as socio-historically defensible notions and systems of notions. I have contested the twin orthodoxies that SF is either the singer of technological progress/breakdown (as the case may be) or a thin disguise for the expression of eternal and mythical human-cum-cosmic verities. Instead, I have tried to at least approach a systematic argument on how history and society are not simply the contexts of fiction but its inly interfused factors, shaping it at least as intimately as shores shape a river or blanks shape a letter. Finally – and possibly as a premise to all the other stances – I have contested on the one hand the academic elitism wrinkling its none too perfect nose at the sight of popular literature and art, and, on the other hand, the fannish shoreless ocean of indiscriminately happy passages to continents full of masterpieces miraculously emerging year upon year.

And yet, SF is not only 'it ain't necessarily so' but also 'things could be otherwise'; not only militant but also (at least in approximation) triumphant. Taking my cue from the matter at hand (as any materialist should), I too have tried to be positive about it and about its criticism, and to say something about those writings which help us to illuminate our interrelated existences: of More, Cyrano, Morris, Wells or Zamyatin, but also of Čapek, Dick, Le Guin, the Strugatskys or Lem. How much I may have succeeded in that in my own writings, or in editing (with Dale Mullen, Robert Philmus, Marc Angenot and Charles Elkins) some books, but above all the journal *Science-Fiction Studies*, is for you to say.

2. How is one, further, to revise essays first published between 1973 and 1984?² I shall paraphrase a quite non-Marxist source here, Husserl, who had to face (*si licet*) similar problems in a new edition of *Logical Investigations*. He adopted as a guideline the practice of not letting anything be reprinted which he didn't believe useful as basis for further analyses, while bettering all that could be bettered without changing the original style – primarily, by clarifying and foregrounding what was earlier implied or uncertain. I have, however, made quantitatively major changes only to the essays 'For a "Social" Theory', originally written for other purposes, and 'The SF Novel as Epic Narration', originally written for a 20-minute presentation. Husserl may also serve as an ally to meet a frequent criticism of *MOSF*: that it was prescriptive rather than descriptive. Never mind that *MOSF* spent 200 large pages on describing four centuries of a genre's history, let me just address the logical confusion underlying such apparently libertarian complaints. True, *MOSF* (as any other study) was normative in the sense of possessing norms of value induced from both the critic's presuppositions and the texts (see Mukařovský, *Aesthetic Function*) and reapplied to texts. Furthermore (as different from some studies) my book foregrounded such norms in order to leave its readers the true freedom of knowing what they were reading and being able to thoughtfully agree or disagree. Yet norms only have sense if they can exist outside of the critic's head. My treatment (in *MOSF* and this book) of the writers mentioned in the foregoing paragraph may be sufficient to prove that they do so. Further, if I say 'a teacher should be learned', I should be credited with knowing there are stupid teachers (after all, I have been both a pupil and a teacher for decades). What my sentence then means is that only a learned teacher is a *good* teacher, that this is what a teacher according to his ends and her potentialities *could be* (in given favourable circumstances). This is a *value-judgement*, as is 'SF should be pleurably cognitive' (by means of estrangement etc.). 'A teacher should not be dumb' means 'a dumb teacher is a bad teacher' and further, 'the less dumb a teacher, the better he is'. The normative maxim ('Love thy neighbour' or 'Don't exploit other people') posits a basic value for its domain. 'SF should be cognitive' (in the way – discussed in my writings at length – a particular genre of fiction can be such) means that an SF text is good in proportion to, among other factors, its cognitiveness. Technically, this position is not prescriptive, but of course it *is* judgemental. However, the

judgement is mediated by falsifiable compositional (syntactic) and meaning-bearing (semantic) elements. Thus, there is a traffic not only between norm and practice (which can change the norm) but also, and primarily, norm and its inner articulation (which can clarify what the norm meant, and whether the reader should agree with it).

This and all such (presup)positions are developed in the present book rather as a dog worries a bone or an old slipper: by picking it up at different points, shaking it, getting at it in all ways to be thought of. It carries over into Part Two which deals with five theoretical problems that reared up as central in the 1970s: a reaffirmation of the *MOSF* position of close kinship between SF and utopia (which I hope to tighten with further tools soon, but could not do in the spacetime at my disposal); an examination of the relation between SF and SF criticism; and two centripetal circlings around the proposition that ideological alienation or success in SF must be proved by means of a text's narrative logic. The essay on teaching is, finally, a transition to applied positions on SF practice, which constitutes Part Three (itself shot through with the preceding presuppositions). I wish to stress that all of these essays were written in consultation with many colleagues from the *SFS* board, but that two of them were co-authored with its co-editors, respectively my friends Marc Angenot and Charles Elkins. Their generous intellectual friendship has prompted them to give me the final pleasure of including the two essays into this book, whose demerits must be mine but whose merits must be shared by them.

As to the essays in Part Three, the problem in them is finding the right link in the unbroken chain that an opus presents. This is an intuitive and not theoretical problem, and it can be mainly judged from its yields. Are Asimov, Yefremov and Lem representative for large cultural areas (the three that matter most to me personally), and if yes are they representative of those dominant horizons I have identified in those areas? Are their and the following writers' opuses sufficient to suggest a certain spread of modern SF? Is de-alienation the strategic position for understanding Le Guin, or artifice and artificiality for Dick? Can the utopia (Harmonyville) of classless relationships, starting out bright and remaining as the background to increasing sombreness, have that function for the Strugatskys respectively the Brauns? Indeed, should one continue to slice the SF continuum according to authors, an ideologically disputed matter? Go thou, reader, and decide by the taste of the pudding. I want to

stress, however, that the collocation of 'SF as Metaphor, Parable . . .' as conclusion is a bid at unifying the theoretical interests from Part Two in narratology as overcoming the pernicious 'formal *vs.* sociological' split of cultural studies – and particularly in the parable as a specific form both of narration and of reference beyond the narrative surface – with the practical but already theoretically informed analyses from Part Three. It is therefore deliberately constructed as the major (and the furthest advanced beyond *MOSF* and *VSF*) piece of theoretical argumentation in this book, flowing into the analysis of a puzzling and (I think) cryptic but ideologically very important SF story which should provide the proof of this pudding, and retroactively of the whole book's symposium.

3. In conclusion, I still remain impenitently committed to seeing SF as a potentially cognitive genre, often hindered from realizing its potentialities by analysable forces in a complex but manmade history. I do not believe that critics can remain bound by the consciousness of the author at hand, nor that they can fetishize 'the text' at the expense of the crucial interface between the text and our common world of ideologies and bodies. In fact, I see the focus of paraliterary criticism in the confrontation of aesthetic and/or political value-judgements with the present situation of the book market, the film, TV and video industry. In the US, all these are almost exclusively profit-oriented, with alienating narrative recipes which make for the overwhelming success of ideological constructs of the Three Laws of Robotics, *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* type. (The situation is somewhat different in the USSR and some other Warsaw Pact countries, but it is after all not fundamentally different. Only the kind of alienation has changed from profit pressures to direct bureaucratic pressures. This still left me with the necessity of exploring in some ways different but also comparable contradictions.) In particular, it would today be necessary to analyse the present shape of the US book and film market. The best-seller mentality invading it from Hollywood is a clear example of how the potentialities of SF are co-opted and sterilized by the economic and ideological forces of the New Right. This has already resulted in vastly overblown novels, poorly organized, often chauvinistic, and reducing the level of SF to that of the best-seller (for example, Pournelle-Niven or the later Herbert). It has also resulted in a startling change of guard among new SF writers: where we had a number of overambitious writers in the 1960s whose reach exceeded

their grasp, now we have a number of underambitious writers who do not reach as far as they could grasp (or so I hope). Of course, some masters of the postwar decades are still with us, and some interesting new voices have come up. But I think there is a preponderance of encroaching flippancy, cynicism, ritual cruelty, and power-worship. This includes the return of crude sexism (for example, Norman's *Gor* series) as counterbalance to the most significant SF development of the last dozen years, some women writers following on Russ, Le Guin and Piercy (Tiptree, Butler, Charnas, Cherryh, Elgin, Holland, Lynn, McIntyre, Sargent, etc.). Thus, the outlook is on the whole disquieting.

I realize full well that – to apply the following essays' analyses to myself – within a 'social theory' of SF criticism between cognition and ideology I stand on antinomic ground. I shall paraphrase Adorno's analysis of musical life (I hope without his – or Lem's – European elitism): 'Because of the coincidence between the established SF writing and criticism and the power of dominant social tendencies, all those that productively and legitimately dissent are being pushed toward sectarianism and marginality, which weakens their legitimacy. Such persons and groups swimming against the main current often suffer a sea change into powerless and heretically charged minorities: they are theoretically "right" but practice gives them the lie.' I hope to have avoided such sectarianism hoarsening my voice and embittering its tone, thus keeping it efficient. But I fully agree with Adorno's Marxian conclusion: 'Nonetheless, the intransigent critique of established cultural processes is to be kept up' (*Einleitung*, p. 152). Facing the Leviathans, we still have our typewriters.

Montreal 1986

D.R.S.

NOTES

1. These three presupposed sources are unavoidably so ubiquitous in this book that I have abbreviated them in the text as *MOSF*, *VSF* and *SFS*. Beyond these three abbreviations, I have to mention three further technical conventions: I write 'utopia' in lower case except when referring to More's country and book (a disambiguating convention I would dearly like to see generally used); some people argue that the indispensable acronym 'SF' for 'science fiction' should be hyphenated

- when indicating adjectival use, but this has seemed pedantic and I trust the reader to interpret it correctly; all essays have been supplied with the original publication date(s) to clarify the context sometimes alluded to.
2. For the record, this volume is a rather strict selection from my writings on SF in periodicals and books by various hands. I have in them published (beside entries in the encyclopaedias edited by Peter Nicholls in 1979, Frank N. Magill in 1979, and C. C. Smith in 1981 and 1985) four bibliographical surveys in *SFS* (1976 and 1978) and *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* (1980 and 1981), two theoretical articles on utopianism and science in *The Minnesota Review* (1976) and *Brave New Universe* (ed. Tom Henighan, 1980), as well as a dozen miscellaneous items – articles, reviews, notes and panel discussions – in *Extrapolation*, *College English*, *SFS*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Quarber Merkur*, *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, *SFWA Bulletin*, and *imagine . . .*. Beyond these, I would have particularly liked, had there been space, to include into this volume: ‘The Science Fiction Novel in 1969’, in James Blish (ed.), *Nebula Award Stories Five* (New York and London, 1970 and 1972); ‘Significant Themes in Soviet Criticism of Science Fiction’, *Extrapolation* (1970); ‘Criticism of the Strugatskii Brothers’ Work’, *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* (1972); ‘The State of the Art in Science Fiction Theory’, *Science-Fiction Studies* (1979); ‘Counter-projects: William Morris and the Science Fiction of the 1880s’ (forthcoming).

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Chapter 3 was first published in *The Minnesota Review*, no. 2/3 (1974); Chapter 5 was incorporated into my *Victorian SF in the UK* (1983), and it is reprinted by permission of G. K. Hall & Co., Boston, Mass. Chapter 6 first appeared in a much smaller form in Zoran Konstantinović *et al.* (eds), *Proceedings of the IX Congress of ICLA* (Innsbruck, 1982); Chapter 8 appeared in Thomas J. Remington (ed.), *Selected Proceedings SFRA 1978 Conference* (Cedar Falls, IA, 1979); Chapter 11 appeared partly in *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, no. 3 (1974) and more fully both in *Foundation*, no. 17 (1979) and as 'Introduction' to the Gollancz and Bantam 1980 translations of the Strugatskys' *The Snail on the Slope*. My 'Conclusion' first appeared in Jean Emelina and Denise Terrel (eds), *Actes du 1er Colloque de s-f de Nice, Métaphores*, no. 9–10 (1984). Though a number of editors properly return the copyright to the author, my thanks go to all involved. I am further beholden to the SSHRC of Canada for a Leave Fellowship in 1980/81 during which Chapter 5 was written, and for travel grants to conferences at Innsbruck in 1979 and Nice in 1983 at which papers were presented that evolved into Chapter 6 and the 'Conclusion'. Work on the first chapter also benefited from the kind help of the British Museum and Library and the University of London Library, as well as of Professor Randolph Quirk and Dr John Sutherland of the English Department, University College, London. Patrick Parrinder's comments (and of course his writing)

were particularly helpful for Chapters 5 and 6. Other debts are recorded in notes to some essays. Charles Elkins was one of the 'circulated' people for many essays, and he has co-authored with me Chapter 7 'On Teaching SF Critically': I still remember with awe and pleasure the telexes and couriers which went between Montreal and Miami on that memorable occasion. As to Marc Angenot, my thanks to him in book after book would perhaps begin sounding stale if they were not constantly renewed by my constantly new learning from him: he was the prime begetter of my fastening on to presuppositions, my guide in the labyrinths of literary sociology and metaphorology, the co-author of the essay 'Not Only But Also' where I truly cannot distinguish what was 'originally' mine and what his, and a constant inspiration through stimulative discussions on almost all matters in this book, from recondite matters of historical detail to narrative semiotics, but especially on those pertaining to Chapters 1, 4, 5 and 6, and the 'Conclusion'. Nena not only read all but provided terrestrial and celestial nourishment for the writer.

At the end I wish to thank Ms Robin Pollock and Ms Holly Potter for word-processor typing and Mme Hectorine Léger for pre-word-processor preparation, and Frances A. Arnold for much editorial patience.

Part One

Some Presuppositions

1

For a 'Social' Theory of Literature and Paraliterature: Some Programmatic Reflections

1. TOWARD A 'SOCIAL' THEORY OF FICTION

1.1. Against the 'Sociology of Literature' Ghetto

I would impenitently maintain the strong scepticism toward 'sociology of literature' formulated in several previous articles – one of which was commenting on a bibliographic survey of about 70 books of sociology of 'high' literature (see Suvin, 1980; Angenot and Suvin, 1981). This is based both on the state of the art (I do not believe we have today more than a few cornerstones for a properly critical sociology or anthropology – cf. Shaw) and on the refusal of politico-philosophical presuppositions which split culture into individual *vs.* collective, also low *vs.* high. If literature is to be approached as *either* collective *or* individual, and its system as *either* 'popular lit.' *or* 'high lit.', we are on the horns of a dilemma. No doubt such a system has been brought about by the bourgeois market, but I refuse to accept it as a 'natural' basis for permanent judgements (though as a practising critic I may at times have to prefer being impaled on one rather than the other horn). It is that split basis itself, the existence of the horns, that I wish to question, following Benjamin's great maxim that every monument of civilization is simultaneously a monument of barbarism. In the articles mentioned, I stressed further that literary texts have a very tricky and delicate relationship to what is usually called the social and historical context. If it is said that a text 'expresses' the context, the insoluble question remains: how is it that literary texts from a more or less identical context – say two succeeding tales or poems by the same author – are so different as not to be reducible to each other,