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Science Fiction and the Technological Revolution

Q: *Some sci-fi critics disagree on whether science fiction is about estrangement, that is, about making us perceive the world in a new or different way, or whether it is a genre that aims to make the incredible seem more familiar. Does it comment on our own world or create new worlds, alternative realities that it inserts us into, in the process rendering them familiar? With reference to at least three course texts, discuss the views. How different are they? How do we relate to science fiction?*

CREATION OF NEW WORLDS AS A LITERAL DEVICE

Is science fiction about perception of the world in a new way or about making the incredible to seem more familiar? I think SF is about both – it comments on our own world and often is doing so in a way that requires creation of completely new world and for understanding it, it depicts this world in understandable, familiar way.

For example, Ursula Le Guin is interested a lot in gender issues and for highlighting them, she chose very special way. In *Left hand of darkness* she created a genderless world and confronted its inhabitants with a visitor that is a man – someone, whose behavior is in a way determined by his gender. For understanding, dis-covering the role of gender she chose an ignorant point of view. For establishing her ignorant position, she had to make us familiar with her genderless world. To make her world believable, she placed it into the universe that could develop from our current situation. For portraying the world of Gethen, she also chose understandable but still different environment – the ice age. As is in science fiction usual, she mixed the real, possible and fantastic in a cocktail that should be believable and tasty (readable). Le Guin conducted a thought experiment to question the gender – a concept that is inseparable part of our world – and for doing so, she tried to make her position somehow independent, ‘objective’, which resulted in creation of whole new world.

Another example, maybe even more illustrative, is Asimov’s story *Nightfall*. Author created a whole world in a believable way in order to ask single question: What happens if the stars should appear only once in thousand years? It is another thought experiment and the literal device is construction of new world, different from our reality. This story is providing more answers than the previous one, but although they are embedded in imaginary world, they refer to the Earthly reality – to the relation between science and religion and relativity of our point of view.

These two stories are focused on comments on our world, using the alternative reality as a device. Let’s find another story, focused on creating the alternative reality with reader simply inserted in, to put it into opposition to the previous two. *Neuromancer*, as a representant of cyberpunk, seem to fulfill this criterion. Reader is an observer, following the fast and complicated plot and detailed description of different world. We may say this story is pure entertainment, because there are almost no questions in the text. But what is the function of such entertainment? Should it make the reader happy and comfortable with every new technology he meets? Presentation of characters that do so – they are not doubtful about the world they live in – may lead to such conclusion. But is it everything the story is telling us? There are characters with changed parts of body (Molly) and other characters that deserve the change of mind (by the means of drugs and cyberspace - Case); there is even more of this –

Tesier-Ashpool corporation that is constructing the world to live in (on the orbit in Villa Straylight and inside the cyberspace). Isn't this obsession with change of human nature a big question: What is the world and body we want to live in? Is it the world of *Neuromancer*? *Daddy's world*? World of *Fahrenheit 451*?

We don't know, but the question is there. It is much more complicated question than "What happens when the stars would appear only once in millennium?" To formulate this question, we need to introduce much more detailed vision of the world, because the answer has to facilitate diverse human wishes. As a result, even more complicated alternative reality that is anchored in our world (as the SF stories are, unlike the Fantasy) is just a literal device for asking the questions, conducting thought experiments. What happen if ...?

Works mentioned:

Asimov, Isaac. *Nightfall*.

Bradbury, Ray. *Fahrenheit 451*.

Gibson, William. *Neuromancer*.

Guin, Ursula Le. *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

Williams, Walter Jon. *Daddy's World*.