

Jung Soo Lee
Advisor: Professor Theodore Martin
Headnotes B List

Headnotes: Science Fiction & Science Fiction Theory

Discuss the list according to the conversations that are happening in between texts in three categories, that which provide and establish the general conventions of SF, texts which focus on altering both the body itself and the perception of the body, those that focus on queerness in the theoretical realm of SF.

In determining the literary history of SF, Freedman's Critical Theory and SF directly continues Suvin's *Metamorphosis of SF*, in describing SF's role as an attempt to consolidate the limitations of the present and imagine a methodology of interrogating the present. In particular, Suvin's understanding of SF in particular as part of a universe that is estranged from reality yet cognitively possible through thought experiments. Freedman expands this basic understanding of Suvin to further specify what SF is, by clarifying the genre as one in which "cognitive estrangement is not only present but dominant" (22), clarifying the difference realist novels and that of SF. What must be made clear is that despite the estrangement from reality, SF is still based on the logically possible. Csicsery-Ronay focuses on this "recognizability" that is dominant in Suvin's understanding of SF, as "if the depicted cultures are not somehow continuous, however tenuously, with the world known by readers, there are no historical handholds for deciding on the legitimacy of the experience represented in concrete description" (258). Lockhurst likewise locates the significance of SF in its connectivity and value as an archive that reflects the social movements and moments of the era, as he identifies the late 1960's in particular as a moment of when the generation gap between "the so-called Establishment and the youth counter culture" (172). He identifies this era as the time of freedom that allowed for such authors as Delaney, Russ, and Le Guin to exist to voice their dissent in an era where realist fiction could not.

The theoretical texts that delve into the histories and conventions of SF, primary that of the Gold and silver age of SF such as Suvin's and Freedman's work view the possibilities of SF in a rather glowing light, regardless of the subject matter and the rather dystopic portrayals of the primary texts involved. The potential that SF brings for social commentary and reform notwithstanding, the majority of SF theory seems focused on only the potentiality for subversion, rather than the reality that these works of SF find themselves in. This tendency is not only limited to the theory text that are considered classics, such as the Suvin and the Freedman. Vint's *Bodies of Tomorrow*, and Lothian's *Old Futures* delve into the newer issues of queerness in SF, yet a similar line of interrogating the potentiality rather than the material reality of what SF texts are depicting in what kind of conditions. By focusing on only the subversive ideas that many texts of the time, the rather depressing nature of the texts themselves are set aside, only to be conscripted towards a particular ideology of progress, presenting a sort of cruel optimism. For SF theory to limit the views of SF to only that is future oriented is to limit the placement of the SF theoretical narrative in its historical as well as literary history and its ability as an archive for the beginnings and birth of a movement.

Ironically, the affect generated by the genre of SF itself is that of a positive attempt to address and potentially initiate social change. However, when examining SF texts, it becomes clear that more often than not SF presents a reality of wherein affect is used as a method of

specifically controlling bodies. Social affect as method and rational to enforce arbitrary normativity is a running thread throughout SF that deals in bodily altercation and perception. Considering SF as a genre, particularly in the form of the novel as well as the short story as a reactionary genre, to limit the theoretical stance to recognizing its subversive nature without acknowledging the material conditions that these works present seems to be a clear limit that should be addressed.

Beginning with the canonical starting points of SF, such texts as *Frankenstein*, *Looking Backwards*, and *1984* provide clear examples of the conventions of the beginning stages of SF, with Asimov's *I, Robot*, and the Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles* providing clear examples of SF's start in periodicals that explore concepts and ideas that displayed what would be the genre's key characteristic of that of an estranged consciousness based on the present, and utopic and/or dystopic visions. However, when discussing the origins of the dialectic of the body in SF, *Frankenstein* begins the conversation of the creation of the body, and the affect that surround the body itself as well as the social formations of the body. This conversation of what the human body is capable of and what its affect could be in the instances of its alteration, either as improvement or as devolution continue in Sturgeon's *More than Human*, Dick's "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale," and *Do Androids*, Tiptree's "The Girl Who was Plugged In," Butler's *Lilith's Brood* Trilogy and Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*. Regardless of the causes, all of the aforementioned texts focus on the human body, and the affect brought on by manipulating essential "humanistic qualities." Where these qualities are located, either in terms of ability and/or inability is irrelevant, as the perception of said body becomes almost universal in its negative reception.

The negative affect created by alterations and mutations is particularly dominant in Butler's *Lilith's Brood Trilogy*, with the explorations of the body and its alterations being clearly divided into mental and invisible alterations, to the visible evolution/devolution according to surrounding affect that is present in the first and second books. Lilith's slow acceptance of subtle shift that result in her inability to recognize herself as human are contrasted with her unchanged outward appearance and her issuing children who are markedly inhuman by appearance but considered human enough to pass. The issuing rejection/acceptance from the surrounding human colonies speak to the negative affect triggered by perception rather than alternate versions of reality. Chief among these examples of altering perceptions and realities are the description of cancer cells and tumors, as well as "sensory organs." Regardless of how these bodies are presented as evolution by the Oankali, they are perpetuated as deformities by humanity. This presents an interesting opportunity for the intervention of medical humanities in terms of generated affect. The generated affect presented in texts focused on interpretations of the body provide ample opportunity to focus on perceived difference and/or similarities as the trigger rather than material reality. This line of thought on affect can be continued in SF text that discuss specifically queered bodies.

When discussing specifically queered and or sexualized/asexualized bodies, Delany's "Aye, and Gomorrah," and *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*, Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness*, Russ' *The Female Man*, Kang's *The Vegetarian* present queered figures that display altered forms of a conventionally or non-conventionally queered bodies. In particular, Russ's *The Female Man* and Kang's *The Vegetarian* present altered forms of self-recognition that present a societal affect that influence how they and their bodies are received in turn. *The Female Man* presents specifically queered bodies in alternate universes and timelines that are influenced specifically by the perception that one gender is superior or inferior as opposed to the other,

while *The Vegetarian* queers the concept of the physical body itself into a different species. The affective dynamics at play generate a point of conflict, not only in terms of determining the influences of affect in creating and forming an identity, but also attempt to bring bodies back into a perceived normativity by force. Affect as force, not only in the body focused texts mentioned above, but particularly in queer SF presents a material base of analysis in arguing for the disparity between generically positive analytical theory and the material history and literature present in SF.

A final category that encompasses the potential for social affect is the construct of a society that emits invisible pressures by altering what is commonly accepted as reality itself. Such texts that would fall under this category in addition to some of the categories above are those such as *Foundation*, *Do Androids*, *Neuromancer*, and *Red Mars*. These texts explicitly take place in an environment that is unrecognizable from our current reality and put these alien landscapes at the fore of the narrative. Particularly for *Neuromancer*, the idea of leaving the physical realm in its entirety is at the core of the construction of the narrative. In addition to introducing the idea of cyberspace as an area that is only occupied by human consciousness, the lack of a physical body is no deterrent for shaping human behavior, as seen by how the *Neuromancer* exerts control over those that occupy the space that she created which in turn are reflected upon the behaviors of the embodied consciousness of the participants. As such, the recognition of affect as method becomes particularly in pursuit of future projects, not only in acknowledging the present, but also in presenting method of interrogating genre fiction in current literary theory as well as in alternate fields.