

# NEWSLETTER

## SPRING 2005

### Issue on Speculative Fiction

SF (speculative fiction/science fiction) addresses contemporary issues in its representations of past or future worlds. There are numerous categories and sub-genres of speculative fiction, but generally there is a distinction between hard science fiction which concentrates on scientific detail and soft science fiction which focuses on sociopolitical themes. Although most scholars agree that the genre originated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, certainly earlier works such as Thomas More's *Utopia*, Francis Bacon's *Atlantis*, Johannes Kepler's *Somnium*, and Voltaire's *Micromegas* predate Poe, Verne, and Wells, and deal with familiar topics, i.e., utopian societies, life on the moon, and extraterrestrials. This issue samples some works of speculative fiction. Lawrence Byrne reviews Voltaire's little-known "Micromegas" as a prototypical SF work. Juan Carlos Toledano Redondo presents an overview of Latin American science fiction. Two African American authors are briefly discussed, Octavia Butler and Walter Mosley; in particular, Kalenda Eaton-Donald briefly reviews Butler's novel *Kindred*. Shelia Levi-Aland explains the importance of SF and fantasy book cover art and gives two interesting examples. A cognitive model as defined by George Lakoff and Mark Turner is included as one approach to works of speculative fiction. Two links are provided to interesting syllabi created by Karen Schneider and William Burling. Finally, a sampling of SF conferences is included followed by a way to access the 1970's MLA discussion of using science fiction in the college classroom.

Helen Connell

Barry University

### Voltaire's "Micromegas": Science Fiction as Satire

Perhaps one of the reasons science fiction has remained so popular with both readers and authors is that it can be turned to serious purposes without ever losing the element of fun that makes any good story essentially entertaining and a pleasure rather than a duty to read. It may be the sheer freedom of experiencing different worlds where what is merely a possibility in ours has become vividly real. Or it may be the excitement, as on an amusement park ride, of witnessing the physical and natural laws, which so often seem to confine us, suspended or exceeded through wild and racy technology. It is this strong sense of fun

that makes "Micromegas," a little known prototypical science fiction story by Voltaire, a delightfully whimsical tale and that also softens what might otherwise be a too nakedly bitter and uncompromising mockery of the puffed up pretensions of our race.

Like *Candide*, Voltaire's best known work, the premise of this story is a journey undertaken by a young man who finds himself, as his creator so often did, exiled from his homeland. But this young man happens to come from the star Sirius and his stature defies all human sense of proportion and physical possibility. He is, the unnamed narrator assures us, no less than "120,000 statute feet" tall, has a waist "about 50,000 feet around," and a nose "some 5,714 statute feet long." What is more remarkable, his mental powers rival his size, for he is a prodigious mathematician, biologist, metaphysician, and philosopher, whose claims about the exact form of the fleas on Sirius are so far advanced and controversial he falls foul of the "mufti," or learned men of his country and is subsequently banished for 800 years because of his heretical opinions. But he is "only moderately afflicted at being banished" and determines to travel "from planet to planet, with a view to improving his mind and soul."

With this most familiar and convenient narrative frame in place, Voltaire proceeds to describe what Micromegas encounters on his travels, employing the startling difference in proportion between observer and what he observes, as Swift does in the first two books of *Gulliver's Travels*, to great satiric effect. The traveler needs no special space ship to speed him on his journey since he has mastered the laws of gravitation and moves about the void of space "sometimes by means of a sunbeam, and sometimes with the help of a comet." He arrives first at Saturn and cannot refrain from laughing at its diminutive size and at the insignificance of its tiny inhabitants. They are, after all, only 6,000 feet high and he finds it hard to comprehend that such tiny creatures can actually think and talk. But, being an enlightened and tolerant fellow, he soon forms a close friendship "with the secretary of the Academy of Saturn" and, to further their studies and expand their knowledge, the pair agrees to launch out farther across space.

Voltaire manages, by means of the spirited debate among these two mismatched philosophers, to make fun of his fellow humans' penchant for flowery and irrelevant metaphors, of their irrational dissatisfaction with the limitations of merely sensory knowledge, and of their equally irrational desire to live always just a few years more even when they recognize the natural and inevitable appropriateness of death. But it is when the two alien beings land on earth, perhaps the first such alien invasion in the history of science fiction, that Voltaire revs his satiric

engines up to Mach 1 speed. The strangers circumnavigate the pitifully puny globe in only thirty-six hours, considering it little more than a molehill, its oceans shallow ponds, its dry land barren expanses that present absolutely no sign of life. Finding none, the Saturnian declares that it is only rational to conclude that "this globe is so ill-constructed, so irregular, and so ridiculously shaped" that it could hardly be supposed "any sensible people should wish to occupy such a dwelling." Yet he realizes he has been too quick to judge when he spots first a whale and then a ship floating along in the Baltic Sea. And when he lifts the tiny vessel close to his eyes the better to examine what he thinks is a strange, stunted creature, he perceives small black spots falling from it. Again he errs, thinking the specks "turds spilling away from the creature" when in fact they are the ship's crew and its passengers, "a flock of philosophers . . . returning from the polar circle" where they have been engaged in research.

Obviously, this uncomplimentary comparison of humans to excrement is the opening salvo of Voltaire's most strenuous satire in the piece. The two giants are delighted to discover that the specks possess "sense," can speak, and even have the potential to reason. Using microscopes and improvising "a pair of monster speaking-trumpets," the space travelers manage to carry on a rather lengthy conversation with the insect-like human philosophers. In the course of this discussion, Voltaire deftly mocks human prejudice and pretension, the futility and ignorance of philosophers and scientists, and the pitiful plight of the masses. The humans reveal themselves to be narrow-minded, tradition-bound, absurdly self-important specks, replete with limited, often erroneous information about their world from which they seem unable to liberate themselves. Of particular note to contemporary readers is Voltaire's treatment of war. As one of the puny philosophers explains to the two giants the absurd causes for which 18<sup>th</sup> century humans are forced by their leaders to fight, it is not difficult to recognize the very same causes we now hear daily to justify our country's dubious, costly battles in a distant land whose existence, until a year or so ago, seemed to have little immediate effect on our own daily lives. This moment in the story recalls another of Voltaire's comments on the abuses of power: "Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities."

The dialogue becomes even more humorously mocking when the philosophers turn from describing what they can see, to speculating about what they cannot, the nature of the human soul, in particular. Here the theories propounded range from the mildly improbable to the purely whimsical. The story closes with a final irony. Micromegas presents the humans he has interviewed and pitied with "a rare book of philosophy, written in minute characters, for their special use, telling all that can be

known of the ultimate essence of things." But when the volume is opened, the pages are discovered to be blank. It is not clear if this is so because they contain, in fact, no writing or because the humans do not possess eyes sufficiently developed or adjusted to read the script.

Yet for all its acerbic humor and razor sharp ridicule, the tale does not leave us with a pessimistic view of our poor earth or of ourselves. Indeed, Micromegas does not mock or decry the wildly varying proportions he discovers on his journey through space, but celebrates and praises the variety of the creation. He notes with genuine wonder that each planet has been filled with beings whose sensory organs and intellectual capacities are precisely calibrated to learn from and properly use the natural phenomena and physical laws of their environment. Rather than leading poor, tiny humans to despair of ever reaching his privileged grand perspective, Micromegas implicitly teaches the reader of this story a reassuring lesson in proper proportion. For the interplanetary giant correctly concludes that humans need once and for all to give up their weak, perennially unfulfilled expectation that some transcendent, even divine being will one day provide them with authentic knowledge and aid their genuine improvement. Rather, in a more expansive version of the lesson that emerges at the end of *Candide*, a lesson, in fact, perfectly suited to the science fiction genre Voltaire was helping to pioneer, Micromegas' visit demonstrates that humans must learn not so much to cultivate their own gardens as to cultivate together their own and only planet.

Lawrence Byrne

Barry University

### **Latin American Science Fiction**

Although almost everybody who reads has heard of Jorge L. Borges, most won't relate any of his works to the SF subgenre. However, that is the nature of most SF written in Latin America, elusive, and indefinable. To understand how this literary production is presently conceived in Latin America, we need to pay attention to different elements: history, literature, and lack of both local publishers and a consumer's market.

Even when, historically, there has been important industrial progress in metropolitan centers such as Buenos Aires, Mexico City and Sao Paulo,

Latin America is a region which is still industrializing. This situation has produced the absence of significant scientific development in the region.

On the other hand, the mixture of Spanish and native cultures also influenced the way Latin Americans produced literature. If Spaniards had a long tradition of mysticism and other traditions of the fantastic, the New World fed that imagination with the perfect landscape and myths to expand the fantastic genre into one that has become a trademark of the Latin American letters. The embracement of the fantastic, together with the lack of industrial development, combined with the social and political problems experienced in the region, contributed to the creation of a type of fantastic focused on the everyday life, hence producing a SF corpus of what is widely known as "soft" SF. Among the most prolific writers of this type of soft SF are J. L. Borges, Bioy Casares, Silvina Ocampo, Leopoldo Lugones, Horacio Quiroga, Oscar Hurtado, Amado Nervo and even Rubén Darío.

Unlike the pulp market revolution that occurred in the US at the beginning of the past century, Latin America has never really had a massive public with the means of buying much literature, let alone SF, and even to this date, there is basically one important publisher, *Minotauro*, that can be linked to the subgenre, and even this one was recently taken over by the giant *Planeta-Agostini*. However, the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has seen the proliferation of writers in countries such as Argentina (Angelica Gorodischer, Carlos Gardini), Chile (Hugo Correa, Pablo Castro), Mexico (Federico Schaffler, Horacio Porcayo), Cuba (Daína Chaviano, Yoss), Brazil (Braulio Tavares, André Carneiro), and Puerto Rico (James Stevens-Arce, Rafael Acevedo); and the Internet has become the cheap and accessible way to reach to more readers than ever (with the Argentinean magazine *Axxon* leading the cyberspace). The Internet has even propitiated the creation of the Association of SF Writers, Editors and Readers this past summer with already more than 400 members from all over Latin America and Spain (<http://es.groups.yahoo.com/group/comunidadcf/>).

I would like to finish by mentioning the contribution that is being made here in the US. In the last years there has been a proliferation of panels dedicated to Latin American SF in prestigious conferences such as CRI, and LASA. In addition, a significant number of scholarly research has been published, of which I would like to mention Andrea Bell and Yolanda Molina-Gavilán's *Cosmos Latinos*, the first collection of SF stories from Latin America and Spain published in English (Wesleyan, 2003). To put it in a nutshell, you don't need to google it anymore, because all you need to know about Latin American SF now is at your service in WordCat.

Juan Carlos Toledano Redondo

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### Octavia Butler

Octavia E. Butler is widely known as one of the first African American women to "break into" the Science Fiction genre. Born in 1947, she began writing short stories as a child inspired by poorly made sci-fi horror films of the period. In a June 2000 interview in reference to these films, she is quoted as saying, "And I thought, 'Geez, I can write a better story than that.'" (Locus Online 2000). Throughout Butler's successful career, she has written numerous novels and short stories and is the recipient of the MacArthur Foundation "Genius Award."

In the novel *Kindred* (1979), Octavia Butler challenges science fiction readers to understand the historical challenges African Americans face, and how these challenges manifest in contemporary America. The central plot of the novel revolves around Dana, an African American woman who is mysteriously teleported back to antebellum slavery in order to *save* her mixed-race family line and subsequently, insures her survival in present day America. Dana survives in the past because she is able to use her knowledge of slavery and history as a guide for assimilation. In addition, her ability to move freely through time and space while maintaining a necessary grasp on "reality" complicates the notion of social progression (many references in the novel are made to the similarities between antebellum America and 1970s America).

Throughout the novel, Dana uses her memories of television shows and literature to aid in her survival. For example, she is constantly aware of the "horror stories" involving disease and mistreatment during the antebellum period and does her best to avoid both. Luckily, her ability to reappear in her own world makes it possible for her to pack antiseptic and aspirin in her traveling bag. The 20<sup>th</sup> century knowledge of 19<sup>th</sup> century disease and death affords her the opportunity to treat wounds, food, and her charge (Rufus) with special care, and thus she becomes revered as a mystic healer.

Some may read Dana's ability to ease into the role of the slave and manipulate the environment around her as an offshoot of social commentary on the practices of African American people. Is the slave woman role so easy for Dana to slip into because she performs a little bit of it everyday in her own world? This matter is complicated when her

white American husband "follows" her back to the past and is accepted within the planter class himself, briefly befriending her "master." Butler also causes us to question what we accept as fact and why. Dana uses knowledge she has gained from television and a constructed history to survive in a non-existent world. In the end, Butler presents history as malleable form while exposing the true science fiction of America's racist past.

## More on Octavia Butler

*Dawn* (1987), the first novel in the Xenogenesis series, likewise weaves together African American history, future societies, serious explorations of the "alien" perspective, and issues based on contemporary developments in genetic engineering. The novel's protagonist, Lilith, a survivor of a nuclear war, awakens aboard an alien space craft to find herself among the Oankali, genetic engineers who need to interbreed to continue their progressive evolution. The Oankali have three genders and communicate through direct sharing of neural sensations. Lilith's dilemma is to "trade" with the Oankali, i.e., to produce half-human children, but this "bargain," of course, includes incorporation of mind and body.

## Walter Mosley

Probably most famous for the Easy Rawlins detective series, e.g., *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Mosley has also written two speculative fiction works, *Blue Light*, and *Futureland*. The collection of stories in *Futureland* include characters such as Dr. Ivan Kismet, the world's richest man and powerful CEO, who is, unfortunately, insane and Folio Johnson, the *noir* cyber-augmented detective in "The Electric Eye." The social commentary in this collection reflects Mosley's own comment, i.e., "The genre speaks most clearly to those who are dissatisfied with the way things are."

## Victoria Poyser-Lisi and Jody A. Lee Book Cover Art

The fantasy book cover is as vital in the selling of the book as a catchy title. The book cover should hint at the world in the novel so the reader will be tantalized and enter. As the realm of fantasy novels often comes from the imagination of the writer, the book cover is normally the only visual reference the reader has. The works of Victoria Poyser-Lisi and Jody A. Lee aptly demonstrate the allure of book covers. In Poyser-Lisi's *The Sword and the Sorceress* (1984) and Lee's *The Black Swan* (2000) the covers not only intrigue the reader but also describe the fantastic adventures contained within the pages.

*The Sword and the Sorceress* is a series that was started by Marion Zimmer Bradley in 1984 that were original short stories that showcased "brave, talented, and heroic women [who] will take readers through enchanted realms of the imagination into danger both physical and mystical, where the only way to survive is through the power of sword and spell." Poyser-Lisi uses a strong female image to assert this concept

into the reader's mind. Unlike many typical science fiction or fantasy covers, this woman is not scantily clad or languishing, she is an active participant. Her cloak contains the demons and evil that she might conjure or conquer, intriguing the reader to find out more. Surrounded by runes, a circle and other symbols of magic, this sorceress is very brave and heroic looking. The subdued palette draws the viewer's attention to the sword and the role it will play in the coming tales. The sword crackles with the power emanating from it and the figure holding it. It is the only object in the cover that has lighter tones, implying that the sword is a saving element. All of the following volumes in this series create the kind of tension and drama that is drawn in Poyser-Lisi's 1984 cover.

Lee's work also hints at the drama created in Mercedes Lackey's *The Black Swan* (2000). In this novel, Lackey retells the classic ballet but adds depth and backgrounds to her characters, while also providing a happy ending. "In her writing, Lackey maintains the grace and lyricism of the original ballet, the characters often seem to be gracefully dancing across the page." Looking at the cover of *The Black Swan*, the reader is immediately reminded of a stately dance. The remotely gracefully swan princess is being led by her evil father into what could be the steps of a dance. The elegance of the costume of Odile and her delicately curling feathers hint about the character that the Prince will fall in love with but her steadfast gaze at the viewer, reveals the courage and feistiness that Lackey's heroines are known for. The black rose and the starry night seen through the window on left (which would be the back cover) foreshadow events in the novel. Lee has taken some elements from the story to tempt the viewer into becoming the reader.

A good book cover not only intrigues the reader, but it also reflects the story found within its pages. Poyser-Lisi and Lee have crafted two book jackets that encourage the reader to pick up the book and explore but have also not completely overshadowed the author's words or the reader's own imagination. It is a delicate balance, but these two artists have succeeded.

Shelia Levi-Aland

Valencia Community College

The Poyser cover is available at

<http://www.syntheverse.com/scripts/Product/ProductDetail.asp?poid=51>.

Lee's cover is available at <http://www.jodylee.net/index2.html>.

### **Transcending Time**

Speculative fiction and film often deal with the relativity of time. One approach that can be used to deal with such texts is George Lakoff's and Mark Turner's discussion of metaphor as cognitive mapping or models acquired by the individual's direct experience and cultural experience. In their work *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (The University of Chicago Press, 1989), Lakoff and Turner designate time as a changer, as a devourer, and as a mover. This model can be used to read Edgar Allan Poe's speculative work *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1837-38), an exaggerated adventure hoax satirizing popular 19<sup>th</sup> century works such as the sensational polar exploration materials of J.S. Symme

Lakoff and Turner note that things change with time, e.g., concrete things such as objects and personal appearance and conceptual things such as values (40). Poe's novel is divided into mirrored halves. North of the equator Pym and Augustus set sail in a small boat and are rescued from a sensational (and not quite believable wreck). Pym is confined in the hold of the next ship; a mutiny occurs because of treachery; the treacherous men are killed providing escape; and the characters then set sail to the equator on a disabled ship. South of the equator, the characters sail toward an island where treachery occurs. The characters are confined in hills but escape by killing treacherous men and then sail in a small boat to the South Pole, where the reader assumes that at least someone has been rescued or there would be no story. So on July 5 (summer north of the equator) a man falls overboard on the ship *Grampus* and on January 10 (summer south of the equator) a man falls overboard on the ship *Jane Guy*.

Throughout the entire novel, Pym's insight changes with the passage of time. Early in the novel, Pym hides in an ironbound box where he remains for three days and nights, or so he guesses. His friend Augustus (who is heard but not seen) leaves a watch since Pym can't tell how long he has been confined. Pym falls asleep, dreams of being smothered by demons, dreams of dreary black water holding human-like trees, and of a huge monster with ghastly white fangs attacking him. But leaving dream time and waking up, the monster is Pym's dog Tiger, thus the hot breath and huge paws of the dream monster morph into friendly dog gestures in the awakened world. This change in point of view is noted by Pym when he says that his "conceptions were in a state of the greatest indistinctiveness

and confusion." Thus Poe is suggesting that the "passing of time" is a matter of perception, a relative and fluid dynamic.

Lakoff and Turner explain that time as a devourer is a special case of time as a changer; in other words, things go out of existence as an event of change (41-42). Things eaten lose their integrity as objects although they are transformed into energy and waste. One graphic example of time as a devourer from *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* is the gradual putrefaction of Augustus's wounded arm. On July 29, the arm shows symptoms of gangrene, what Poe calls mortification. On July 30, as Augustus's condition worsens, he prays for deliverance. By July 31, the arm is completely black from the wrist to the shoulder, and finally, on August 1, Augustus dies. When the men try to throw the body overboard, a leg comes off the decomposed body while the mass of putrefaction is consumed by sharks. By August 1, the water has been transformed into worms mingled with slime. Thus Poe describes not only the destruction of matter but also the creation of matter. Soon after, the ship crosses the equator, and the second half of the novel begins.

Finally, Lakoff and Turner explain that time may be seen as moving, i.e., we are in the present and facing the future with the past at our back. Poe's mirrored halves of the novel certainly illustrate this metaphorical notion. The digression of proper stowage in chapter 6 also suggests shifting perceptions in time, as does the digression in chapter 7.

The three metaphors of time so vividly represented in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* are a staple of speculative fiction and film. *Dark City* (1998) directed by Alex Proyas is an example. The Strangers, as aliens, are testing human subjects by altering physical reality and mixing individual memories. But Murdoch's flashbacks of his past allow him to resist the ability of the Strangers to stop time and to manipulate reality. *Dark City*, as many other works of speculative fiction, asks questions about time and about memory. Using Lakoff's and Turner's explanations of time as metaphor may be one way to approach works of speculative fiction.

### **Speculative Fiction/Science Fiction and Fantasy Syllabi**

There are numerous syllabi available on-line, with titles such as American science fiction, in post modern speculative fiction, in feminist science fiction, in science fiction and medicine, and in science fiction and fantasy. Dr. Karen Schneider's syllabus available at <http://www.wku.edu/~karen.schneider/e340.htm> is one example. Schneider uses novels as well as an anthology of science fiction and fantasy. Films are also included. Another excellent example is the

syllabus of Dr. William Burling whose syllabus is available at <http://www.faculty.smsu.edu/w/wjb692f/366%20Science%20Fiction/366%20Science>. Many of Burling's course web pages contain useful materials for those interested in Cultural Studies, Frankfurt School theorists, and Marxist-based Critical Theory, as well as Sci-Fi and Fantasy.

### **A Sampling of Conferences**

**DRAGON\*CON - September 2-5** in Atlanta, Georgia is a conference focusing on science fiction and fantasy, gaming, comics, art, music, and film. Information about the conference and the organization is available at <http://www.dragoncon.org/>.

**IAFA-26 - March 16-20, 2005** will be held in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. This conference focuses on crossing boundaries of genres and genders and of reality and illusion. Movements include, but are not limited to, Cyberpunk, Steampunk, and Slipstream. See IAFA website (the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts).

**OASFiS 18 - May 27-29** in Orlando, Florida is a conference held by a fan-run group which promotes and celebrates science fiction and fantasy. Conference information is available through the home page at <http://www.oasfis.org/>.

**WisCon 29 - May 27-30, 2005** is the "world's only feminist science fiction convention," and will be held Memorial Day weekend in downtown Madison, Wisconsin. Writers, publishers, scholars, artists, women and men gather to discuss science fiction and fantasy focusing on issues of gender, race, and class. <http://www.sf3.org/wiscon/index.html>

### **MLA 1978 Proceedings**

The proceedings of the MLA special session in New York, December 1978 are available on-line through Science Fiction Studies #19, November 1979. These proceedings focus on the "unique challenges" in teaching science fiction and include discussion by Samuel Delany and Robert Scholes. Delany's contention that universities are filled with people who refuse to read science fiction may not be as relevant today as in 1978. Reading these 27-year old proceedings provides some interesting insights into academics' perspectives on the genre.

