

Science Fictional Aesthetics: The Novum & Cognitive Estrangement in Contemporary Art

Dr. Andrew Frost, School of Media Arts, College of Fine Arts, Paddington, NSW, Australia, 2256.
Email: <tezbj@hotmail.com>

Abstract

Science fiction and contemporary art are connected by a set of related conceptual interests and formal expressions. This paper argues that two concepts in the critical study of SF, the novum and cognitive estrangement, are applicable to the practice and interpretation of much contemporary art. Discussing the work of contemporary new media artists whose practice has explicitly dealt with SF themes and tropes in various forms, the paper argues that the use of these two key critical SF concepts help to define a new and under-theorised cultural formation: the science fictional.

Keywords: science fiction, media art, novum, estrangement, video, installation, critical theory.

The space where science fiction and contemporary art meet is growing. From *Awfully Wonderful* at Performance Space in Sydney in mid-2011 and *Star Voyager* at ACMI in Melbourne in 2011-12, to a tribute exhibition to the late JG Ballard held at the Gagosian Gallery in London in 2010, this engagement between SF and contemporary art is made all the more apparent by the forthcoming 2014 Biennale of Sydney, titled *You Imagine What You Desire*, an exhibition that will make "...enquiries into contemporary aesthetic experience, and relate [it] to historical precedents and future opportunities to imagine possible worlds" [1].

This exhibition activity has coincided with a growing critical discourse on the meeting of these formerly separate worlds, such as 2012's Melbourne Art Fair SF-art symposium that included papers by theorists Amelia Barikin and Mark Von Schleggel, and the publication of *Making Worlds: Art & Science Fiction*, edited by Barikin and Helen Hughes. Much of this critical dialogue has taken place in Australia, but significant international conferences and symposia such as *Speculations: The Future Is _____*, 50 nights of lectures, debates and discussions presented by the online journal Triple Canopy and recently staged in New York, indicates a significant international interest.

One of the notable features of this activity has been the inability, or perhaps unwillingness, of artists and art theorists to define what it is they mean when they say "science fiction" or attempt to define its operations. Although science fiction in its

cinematic and literary forms has been the subject of a sustained critical inquiry since at least the early 1970s, contemporary art theorists have largely overlooked this discourse in favour of more a general engagement with SF and to focus on selected aspects of the genre for the sake of individual artistic inspiration while applying the critical discourses of art to SF as a kind of errant, uncritical pop cultural subject ripe for exploitation. In this engagement, science fiction is typically defined as a kind of fiction concerned with technology and the future, speculating on the outcomes of the meeting of one with the other. While this definition is reasonable enough, it is also limiting because, as we shall see, science fiction operates in both perceptual and interpretive modes, and the 'futuristic' technology so familiar from culturally dominant SF sub genres such as Space Opera is but one aspect of the interaction between cognition and estrangement.

Von Schleggel, a critic and writer whose work has migrated from art criticism to science fiction proper - albeit SF published by *Semiotext[e]* - argues that while the mix of SF and contemporary art is a trend in the 'super culture' of the international art world, it amounts to a destruction of SF [2]. von Schleggel argues further that while this fusion of SF and art is taking place, a true melding is yet to come, and that it must be respectful of the "better angels of both cultures" [3].

While it may be said that the makers and theorists of contemporary art are increasingly drawn to SF, it cannot be said that the writers and theorists of science fiction are all that interested in contemporary art. Texts by SF theorists tend to concentrate on the relationship between visual media and the technology and techniques of SF illustration, such as studies of the works of illustrators who produce book and magazine covers, and the production designers and concept artists who test-run the imagery of Hollywood genre cinema.

Notable contributions from SF literary scholars - such as those by Gary Westfahl and George Slusser's in *Unearthly Visions: Approaches and Science Fiction and Fantasy Art* [2002] - are often undercut by America-centric views or historical misunderstandings of the production of value in contemporary art. Westfahl for example posits a history of science fiction illustration that ignores developments in the UK and France in

the 1970s, a period he dismisses as the decade where nothing happened [4]. Slusser meanwhile claims that the general cultural value of contemporary art is measured by the so-called 'genius' of artists and their adherence to anti-human abstraction [5]. Roger Luckhurst's engagement with SF and contemporary art is more nuanced. His essay *Found-Footage Science Fiction* speculates on collage as a kind of narrative art [6], while *Contemporary Photography and the Technological Sublime, or, Can There Be A Science Fiction Photography?* [7], places the photographic work of a variety of contemporary artists into the tradition of the science fictional sublime. While the US artist John Powers has forged an idiosyncratic discourse between the iconography of Star Wars and Minimalism, in essays such as *Star Wars: A New Heap* [8] and on his blog *Star Wars Modern* [9], very few SF writers profess an interest in art history or design or any visual medium beyond cinema, or are meaningfully engaged with contemporary art. J.G. Ballard, whose life-long interest in art is well documented, and William Gibson's myriad references to media and product design in his fiction, are two rare exceptions.

So what might a 'true melding' of science fiction and contemporary art look like? And on what basis could their shared interests be understood? The definition of science fiction as a genre has been the subject of considerable debate but, broadly speaking, its critical analysis rests on one of two approaches: the first is the tracing and identification of historical antecedents to contemporary SF that in turn reveal an historical constancy of themes and approaches [10, 11], and the second approach is borne of critical theory that postulates and speculates upon generic tendencies and functions of a text [12, 13, 14]. It is in this second approach that two concepts can be applied to contemporary art, and specifically to new media - namely, the *novum* and *cognitive estrangement*.

Before we discuss these concepts, it is worth taking a moment to acknowledge that SF and art already share common ground. Since both are informed by critical theory, there might be a useful application of concepts found on the SF-theory side to contemporary art. More importantly, if the theory of SF literature and cinema might be applied to contemporary art, then what does that theory mean for an understanding of that intersection? It is the proposition of this paper that this

liminal zone is the *science fictional*, a trans-generic tendency of the contemporary cultural object that resonates with shared ideas and themes, but also speaks of a global and anxious aesthetic famously described by Frederic Jameson as a “vast, decentred complexity,” where the “impossible totality of the contemporary world system” [15] is manifested.

One of the key theorists of SF is Darko Suvin, the Yugoslavian-born literary theorist whose definition of science fiction is a description of the action of a science-fictional text. According to Suvin, “Science fiction is a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework, alternative to the author’s environment” [16]. Suvin’s theory of *cognition* suggests, “the seeking of rational understanding” while *estrangement* is something that is “... akin to Bertolt Brecht’s *verfremdungseffekt*”, that is, a representation that “... allows us to recognise [the] subject but at the same time make it unfamiliar” [17].

A key aspect of Suvin’s theory is the concept of the *novum*. The *novum* is literally “the new thing” that crystallises the “difference between the world of fiction and ... the real world outside” [18]. Frankenstein’s monster is one example of a *novum*, so too spacecraft, time machines or any other fictional reality made strange by the addition of a counter-intuitive yet plausible narrative mechanism that allows the functioning of the story itself. Suvin’s conception of science fiction is of a set of inter-related narrative mechanisms that rely on the audience’s ability to recognise that mechanism without fully understanding the effect it produces. In this sense, “science” is much as Brian Aldiss defined it — an advanced, if confused, state of knowledge [19]. Suvin’s theory also suggests a dialectic between estrangement and cognition. As SF theorist and historian Carl Freedman argues:

“[Estrangement] refers to the creation of an alternative fictional world that, by refusing to take our mundane environment for granted, implicitly performs an estranging critical interrogation of the latter. But the *critical* character of the interrogation is guaranteed by the operation of cognition, which enables the science-fictional text to account rationally for

its imagined world and for the connections as well as the disconnections of the latter to our own empirical world” [20].

According to Freedman, without estrangement this dialectic results in realist fiction but without cognition “the result is fantasy, which estranges, or appears to estrange, but in an irrational ... way” [21]. Freedman argues that, beyond straightforward examples of more-or-less pure genre SF or Fantasy, certain ideas, themes and tropes are hard to justify as cognitively valid. For example, can stories contain as their *novum*, the concept of parallel universes and still be considered plausible? “The crucial issue for generic discrimination is not any epistemological judgment external to the text itself on [the question of] rationality or irrationality ... but rather the *attitude of the text itself* to the kind of estrangements being performed” [22]. In other words, the context of the *novum* is crucial — presented in a rational, realist manner even apparently counter intuitive devices can be considered ‘scientific’.

This is the basis of the twinned concepts of the *novum* and cognitive estrangement. So how might this apply to electronic and new media art? Let’s take a look at three examples of recent science fictional artworks.

In 2010 the Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer installed the work *Solar Equation* in Federation Square, Melbourne, as part of the *Light in Winter Festival*. Featuring “the world’s largest spherical balloon” the orb was a scale model of the sun some “100 million times smaller than the real thing” [23]. Projections on to the surface of the balloon were of “live mathematical equations that [simulated] the turbulence, flares and sunspots that can be seen on the surface of the Sun” and used the latest “solar observatory imaging available from NASA, overlaid with live animations derived from Navier-Stokes, reaction diffusion, perlin, particle systems and fractal flame equations” [24]. Although the amassed technology used to simulate the activity on the Sun created a schematic outline, *Solar Equation*, sited in the densely built centre of Melbourne, had an impressive visual impact. Writing on his website, the artist stated that:

“While pertinent environmental questions of global warming, drought, or UV radiation might arise from the contemplation of this piece, *Solar Equation* intends to likewise

evoke romantic environments of ephemerality, mystery and paradox, such as those from Blake or Goethe. Every culture has a unique set of solar mythologies and this project seeks to be a platform for both the expression of traditional symbolism and the emergence of new stories” [25].

Solar Equation allowed viewers with the appropriate iPhone app to remotely control the colour and seasonal variation of sun activity within the simulation. The artist also devised a real time tracking technology that allowed the five projectors beaming images onto the spherical surface to compensate for any movement. The immediate theatricality of the work was undeniable but it was in this process of interactivity and obfuscation of technique that the true nature of the artist’s speculative ‘new stories’ was revealed. In an interview Lozano-Hemmer explained the desired effect of the piece:

“From the point of view of someone watching it, it just looks like it works. But the engineering behind it enables that uncanny moment of actually having a registration between the real and the virtual [...] What I’m trying to do with my work is emphasise [...] how virtual the material is and how material the virtual is...” [26].

The duo known as The Otolith Group, the collaborative art project of Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar, and various collaborators, has explored science fiction narratives and themes, either as explicit drivers of individual works, or as a theoretical background. Their exhibition *Westfailure* [2012], for example, consisted of several related individual works which included text, photographs, vinyl album covers, sound, video and performance.

One work *Daughter Products* [2011], featured a suite of archival images in which the viewer witnessed “socialist camaraderie as delegations visit factories, schools, museums, etc” and in which “images act as delegates from the past: they disperse doubt in favor of previous political uncertainties and provide us with the hope of disturbing the temporal autonomy of the markets, myths and more” [27]. The framed prints were exhibited alongside *Anathema* [2011], a video work that imagined the liquid crystals in touch screen technologies as a connected, sentient life form.

The *Westfailure* exhibition sought to revisit “episodes from the archives of

the twentieth century in order to intervene into narratives that aim to capture futurity for market fundamentalism” [28]. The Group’s works are typically fragmented and discursive, based or inspired by texts, and purposefully incomplete, like the unfinished or work-in-progress archive. As art critic Nina Power put it: “The past is littered with the debris [of failed] futures, while our present incorporates memory of hopes that have long been abandoned ... The Otolith Group doggedly investigates these temporal slips and Utopian dreams of ‘the temporality of past potential futurity’” [29].

Where the Otolith Group’s work is diverse in form and eclectic in its engagement with SF, the work of Anne Lislegaard is formally more conservative. Lislegaard has explored science fiction narratives in her video, audio and installation pieces, extending and making abstract narratives derived from SF texts. The first work in her trilogy of SF video installations was *Bellona (After Samuel R. Delany)* [2005], in which a single projection of a 3D animation played out across a screen in the gallery space. In Delany’s novel, *Bellona* was a future city in which space and time had become weird and uncertain, made strange by some unnamed event. Lislegaard’s installation presented “... a psychological space, in which norms and standards seem to dissolve into chaos of anti-hierarchical conditions, a shifting labyrinth of displaced memories and inexplicable events, where lights switch on and off and doors and windows open and shut without any apparent reason” [30].

Crystal World (After J.G. Ballard) [2006] extended this approach into a two screen work. Side-by-side screens presented a dual projection where a computer generated, black and white animation of the interior of a room played out, broadly schematized but suggestive and eerie, the right hand screen intermittently giving way to text taken from the Ballard story of the title. Along with her later *Left Hand of Darkness (after Ursula K Le Guin)* [2008] Lislegaard’s trilogy of video installations extended the room space of the gallery by matching the scale of the CGI room to the gallery’s architecture and, by panning across the spaces, and cutting and dissolving, the visual effect was dizzying and disturbingly effective.

How might we apply the concept of the novum and cognitive estrangement

to these works? The answer lies in context and placement, or as Freedman suggested, in the attitude of the texts. In both the work of the Otolith Group and Lislegaard, the viewer is required to entertain a state of estrangement. The Otolith Group’s collagist approach to narrative requires an active engagement with the content that will allow the audience-viewer to decode their intentions, and counter-intuitively accept that, as in a science fiction story, the past can communicate with the future, or conversely, what is done in the present can change the past.

The metaphor of trans-temporal memory, like the time travel machine, is embodied in the novum of the exhibition. Lislegaard’s work is more easily decodable as SF, with its moody soundtracks and audio mixes, yet its poetic engagement with SF shares something of the Otolith Group’s discursivity, the novum found in the projection but also the gallery space itself. In Lozano-Hemmer’s *Solar Equation*, the disjunction between experience and understanding underscores the mimetic nature of the work while simultaneously highlighting the strangeness of the experience. The viewer knows that the sun cannot float above Federation Square, but for an “uncanny moment” it did. This sort of slippage between the fictional and the real produces the cognitive estrangement effect of science fiction within contemporary art.

The curious aspect of these twinned concepts of the novum and estrangement is the willingness by which we enter the experience. As in the theatre, or at the cinema, on the page, or in the gallery, we entertain the fictional frame of the narrative. Science fiction shares with other genres, indeed with all fiction, the mystery of the withheld; the details of why and how and what for that are artfully suspended, those elements that urge us on to discover answers. Science fiction shares with media art the technological apparatus that allows the cognitive reasoning of fiction to appear rational, possible, and almost real. Lozano-Hemmer’s *Solar Equation*, with its highly technical construction and delivery, acknowledges its artificiality while seducing us with the illusion that the sun has come down to Earth. We know that it isn’t real, but the possibility is tantalising, and so we happily accept the estrangement. So too Lislegaard’s mirrored rooms - even with the artificial outline and the shifting perspectives of her video installations, we entertain the

estrangement of their placement, beckoned to walk through walls. In the Otolith Group’s multi-part artworks we experience a fragmentary and diffuse narrative united by the frame of the gallery.

What might we deduce from this correlation between the critical theory of SF and contemporary art? In the zone of the *science fictional* we find a meeting of the better angels of SF and art, a comingling that raises intriguing questions about the nature and the affect of contemporary art and the aesthetics of media and electronic technologies. Jameson argued that a single artwork was capable of encapsulating the entire world, including the social, cultural and ‘natural — those often antagonistic concepts — within a single object’ [31]. Jameson described a fragmented and spatialised postmodern experience: “If experience and expression still seem largely apt in the cultural sphere of the modern, they are altogether out of place and anachronistic in a postmodern age, where if temporality still has its place, it would seem better to speak of the writing of it than of lived experience” [32].

Jameson suggested a reflexive relationship between art and wider culture, and in the specific example of science fictional aesthetics, an acknowledgement of the writing of our experience. Indeed, with the novum of the contemporary art object, and the willing estrangement of our cognitive abilities, we are experiencing a reflection not so much of a possible future, but of the here and now.

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