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# Science Fiction and the Imperial Audience

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.

I'D LIKE TO SHARE SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THE VERY CLOSE RELATIONSHIP between the concepts of empire and science fiction (sf), with some glances at globalism and posthumanism—all of which to my mind are intricately interwoven. I would like to look at the subject from five different angles—which I'll designate as five parts.

## Part I. The view from the ground.

Everyone in this room has been partially shaped by the politics of empire, in one form or another—as imperial subjects, resisters from the periphery, com-pradors, immigrants, children of immigrants, posthuman managers, resident aliens, cosmopolitan flaneurs, or merely speakers of English. I'll tell you my story. I was born a month after my parents arrived in the US as refugees from the Communist coup in Hungary. My father had been in the coalition government after World War II; he was imprisoned, tortured, escaped, and came to the United States. My father lived in the US for more than forty years. After the Communist government stripped him of his Hungarian citizenship, he remained officially stateless. He did not perfect his English, and he made an oath to return to his homeland as soon as there were free elections or the occupying troops left, whichever came first. Before the revolution in 1956, he thought those things might happen in a matter of months. After its defeat he settled in for a long haul, but his bags were in a sense always packed. The Russians did finally leave in January of 1990, and my father was back in Hungary in April. He was a deep-dyed patriot of a small nation—a nationalist, if you will—who mocked both the Russians and the Americans. He often spoke of them in similar terms, as two gigantic children, indiscriminately stamping on small nations, many of which had long rich histories. Some had been empires themselves once. My mother was not so fanatical. She became an American citizen, gained a good administrative position as a librarian, spoke English well,

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and tolerated my sister and me speaking English in the home. But she, too, went back in 1990.

As I grew up, my parents told me countless stories of The War. My mother had witnessed the bombing of Rotterdam, and after taking the last train east from Holland, where she had lived for many years as a foster child, she experienced the horrific Russian siege of Budapest. My father, who was in the underground, was strafed by German jets. Both of them survived the heavy bombing of Budapest by allied planes. Many years later, on summer visits, I would see shells of bombed out buildings, unreconstructed. Those war stories of being battered by three imperial armies are in some ways more vivid to me than my own memories. I have lived all my life in the States. I played baseball; I played guitar in R&B bands; I wrote poetry in English; I studied all the Civil War battles. I have never come under an artillery attack. And yet I still refer to most of my friends and compatriots as “Americans,” as if I were not really one of them. In my 20s, my wife Etti and I lived in a Greenwich Village apartment whose sixth floor window looked out to the Twin Towers. On summer nights we would sit on the fire-escape, watching the giant buildings light up. We did not refer to them as the World Trade Center. I called them the Towers of Babylon.

Each of us carries residues of different angles of vision on the world — vibrating strata of consciousness that, if we could articulate them, would seem contradictory, mutually canceling. They are assemblages of world-views, and one of the ineluctable worlds we see, and see from, is empire, the grand-scale collection of diverse multitudes under the control of a class that supposedly transcends tribal and national boundaries, for whom knowledge and conquest are indistinguishable, and one day or another one will have to face its power. If you speak English, you know you have the imperial visa. If you speak it fluently, you are an imperial, whether you think so or not.

## **Part II: The view from the ether.**

Each of us has an angle on Empire, because we have lived in an Age of Empires. (Who hasn't? you might add.) Empires fascinate us as other state-formations do not. They have a much longer pedigree than nation states. We can identify them in many histories and regions of the globe. They simplify our sense of history. They collect populations, gaudily display military violence and cultural muscle. Unlike nation-states, they seem to have organic lives. Nation-states pretend they are immutable abstract entities. Empires are mutable—they rise and expand robustly, reach plateaux, and then decline with entertaining displays of moral and cultural decay. Because of their great temporal and spatial scale, we tend to see them from a bird's eye view, from the ether—and their structural and symbolic similarities are far more obvious than their local details.

There is a booming field at the moment in comparative empire studies. Scholars establish the basic contours supposedly of all empires: the form of a wheel with a hub and many spokes, but no rim—in other words, a metropolitan core and the outlying dependencies all connected to the center by increasingly efficient communication and transportation systems (Motyl, *Imperial Ends* 16). The dependencies do not interact much. When they do, the core's government and language are there to mediate and dilute. When empires are most robust the peripheries communicate and exchange goods directly with the core—taking on its institutions, its cultural practices, its language of culture and administration, and enduring its violent discipline. The metropolises in turn attract people from all the spokes. They create an atmosphere of more or less tolerance for diversity, the cultivation of knowledge for the furtherance of power, and sometimes even versions of gender and racial equality, side by side with complexly organized servitude. Then comes the inevitable senescence—the center cannot hold, peripheries revolt, factionalism and fanaticism erupt, infrastructure decays, external enemies penetrate, peripheral customs become more interesting than central ones. This is history on a blockbuster scale—widescreen baroque melodrama.

Much of our discourse about empires in democratic modernizing societies has been correspondingly moralizing and even triumphalist. Empires are evil. Emperors go off the rails with absolute power—because, Caligula, Ghengis Khan, Napoleon, Hitler. We often use the models from the 1960s and 70s anti-imperialist movements, the rejection of both US and Soviet hegemony. But of course not all empires of the past were so autocratic, or even so politically centralized. Empires have been democratic—like the Athens described by Thucydides in *The Peloponnesian Wars*; they have been commercial—as the British Empire was in the early days; or even bureaucratic, as it was in its last phase. Americans do not like to call the diffusion of their global power by the name of Empire—somehow “the last remaining superpower” feels more comfortable.

Empire theory has come back in a big way. Not only are historians studying past formations, but many scholars also consider comparative study of empires a key to policy in the present. They argue that treating great geopolitical players on the model of empires will help to predict their future behavior. And indeed, most of the dominant and aspiring players of our time were themselves empires once, and they use this history in many ways, subtle and crude, to deepen their legitimacy. It is striking to watch work on “re-imperialization” theory from years ago predict with eerie prescience the actions of Russia in Crimea today. (Motyl, “Why Empires Reemerge” 138 ff.).

### **Part III: Science Fiction and the Globe.**

Political scientists think more and more in terms of global alignments, world-

systems, global electronic networks, and the politics of transnational capitalism. Their interest is clearly driven by the need to understand new formations and interactions that require scales not provided by models based on international alignments. The useful models inevitably come to seem more and more science fictional, for sf has a good claim to be the first genre to imagine the earth as one world, and to treat that one world as its default setting. Perhaps uniquely among artistic movements, sf has had no difficulty adjusting to the currents of globalization. In a sense, it occupied that ground before history and political economy arrived there.

Here is a somewhat disorienting fact: observation of the planet earth from the outside is a historically recent phenomenon. I mean not only actual observations, but imaginary ones as well. In fact, sf has a good claim for being the first mode of thought to imagine seeing the planet from a secular, material perspective—i.e., not as angels might. The early, pre-Enlightenment heroes of proto-sf often traveled to the Moon and beyond, but they rarely looked back. The earliest versions of this extraterrestrialist perspective on the earth were probably Francis Godwin's *Man in the Moone* in 1638, followed by Fontenelle's *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* in 1686, and most famously Voltaire's *Micromégas* in 1752. In the technoscientific age, sf's pride of place in representing this perspective on the planet is even stronger.

Here are two of the first passages describing the earth seen as an object of a scientific, materialist extraterrestrial gaze. The first is from Jules Verne's *Around the Moon*, published in 1870. The team of lunar explorers observe through a porthole the curve of the earth as it wanes toward the new. They see only a thin crescent of light; most of the planet is obscured in night. After a round of detailed astronomical explanations, the narrator closes with a cosmic view:

This was all they saw of the globe lost in the darkness, an inferior star of the solar world, which for the grand planets rises or sets as a simple morning or evening star! Imperceptible point in space, it was now only a fugitive crescent, this globe where they had left all their affections.

The other passage is shorter, but has had a greater effect. They are the opening lines of H.G. Wells's *The War of Worlds*, published in 1898.

No one would have believed in the last years of the nineteenth century that this world was being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man's and yet as mortal as his own; that as men busied themselves about their various concerns they were scrutinised and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinise the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water.

Such off-world gazes don't abound in either author's work, but they are potent. In Verne's major works yet to come it will become the cartographic globe that European powers are in the process of consolidating under their imperial science. Wells's single sentence, by contrast, introduces what we might call the vortical, probing, reflective perspective on the planet, not as an object of humanity's scientific gaze, but of another intelligence's. It is an intelligence as imperialistic as our own. In fact, it is so similar that the narrator compares it to the European settlers who wiped out the Tasmanian aborigines, but on a much greater scale: all of terrestrial humanity is inseparable from the whole planet in these alien outsiders' eyes. It—and we—are small, vulnerable, exploitable, and, as it also turns out, volatile and unpredictable.

That references to seeing the earth as a single material object or system are so rare is surprising, since such a view is one of the tenets of European Enlightenment thought. Gains in scientific knowledge and technology that endowed European societies with the power to collect distant regions and populations under their hegemony were in effect producing the prospect of the “one world,” a planet governed by the unifying “universal principle” of enlightened progress and modernization. The concept of the “universum” was adopted from ecclesiastical hegemony, and carried a distinctly non-materialist reference to the centrality of humanity in the cosmos. The post-Copernican enlightenment thinkers reduced its focus to the earth, but it is an earth expanding from within by its future prospects of intellectual liberation for the entire human species and unlimited communication and material development.

It's worth quoting Kant, the most influential voice of this concept of universalization, from a passage from his great manifesto, the “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View”:

However obscure [the] causes [of human actions], history, which is concerned with narrating these appearances, permits us to hope that if we attend to the play of freedom of the human will in the large, we may be able to discern a regular movement in it, and that what seems complex and chaotic in the single individual may be seen from the standpoint of the human race as a whole to be a steady and progressive though slow evolution of its original endowment.

While individual careers may seem chaotic, the “human race as a whole” is evolving steadily according to Nature's plan. By analogy, the same principle applies to localities, regions, and countries. The edges will be smoothed; the enormous cultural differences standing in the way of progress will be drawn into modernization's “steady and progressive though slow evolution.” With the intensification of the colonialist projects into full-fledged imperialism, the

species unity of humanity soon becomes essentially a pretext for annexing more and more difference into a culturally and economically, if not quite politically, unified planet. Still, we must acknowledge in these ideas also the basis for the modern drive for universal human rights, a united nations (which Kant prefigured in his essay), and the gradual uplift of all people previously excluded from full human species membership—women, non-Europeans, children, the disabled—into a utopian world in which there will be no excluded, othered human beings. (Let's also note that much of this utopian species consciousness is predicated on what has been called a “war against [other] animals.”)



*Fig. 1: Blue Marble NASA Goddard Space Flight Center Image by Reto Stöckli*

This drive to utopian universalism met with resistance—in the colonized lands, of course, but also in Europe itself by the romantic counter-enlightenment. Philosophers like Herder affirmed strongly that the highest value was in appreciation of cultural differences. In a sense, nevertheless, the battle was already lost. Even the romantic nationalist movements essentially stipulated to the power of progressive evolution. The formation of nation states was deemed necessary—from Bolivar’s Latin America through revolutionary Europe and eventually to decolonized Asia and Africa—so that nations could act as their own autonomous modernizing agents. As in *Star Trek*, the ideal would be “infinite diversity in infinite combinations,” presided over by a consensual cosmopolitan federation with the powers of empire.

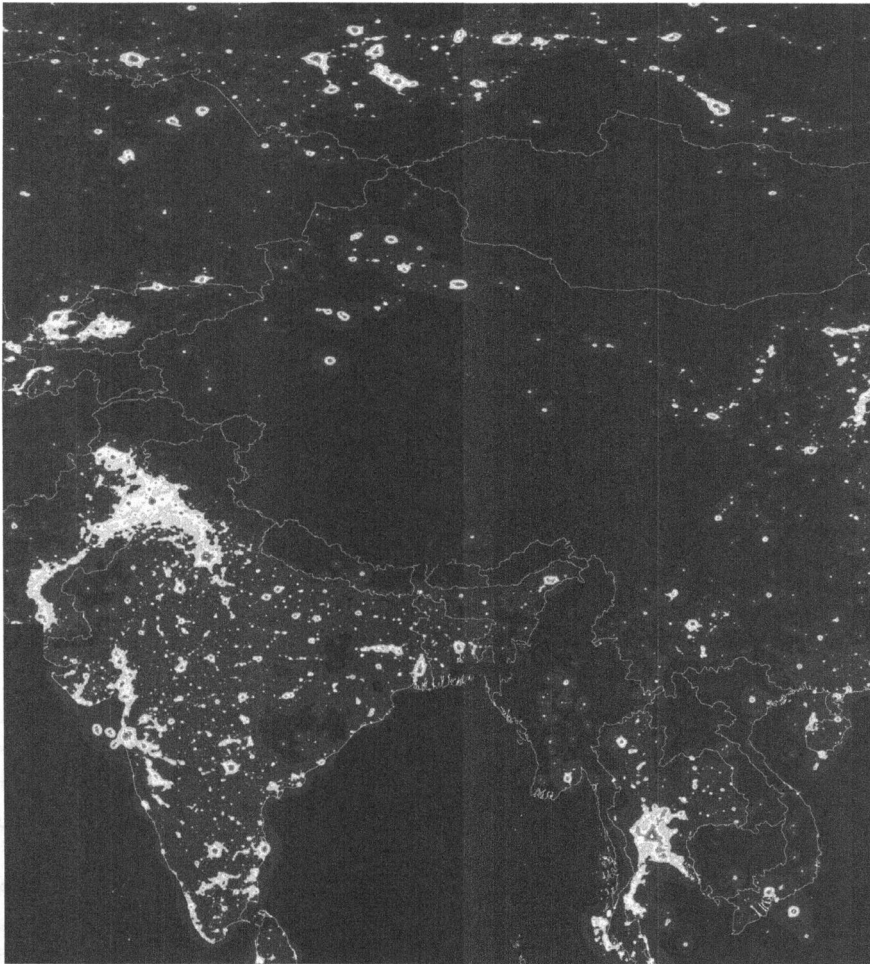
The first photograph of the whole earth was not taken until 1967—eventually to be replaced by the more famous photo taken from Apollo 17 in 1972, affectionately known as the Blue Marble (figure 1). The image had an almost immediate psychological effect throughout the world, becoming the poster icon for transnational ecological and care movements. This, too, was foreseen not by the laity, but by Fred Hoyle, the celebrated astronomer and sf writer—writing in 1948:

Once a photograph of the Earth, taken from outside, is available, we shall, in an emotional sense, acquire an additional dimension...Once let the sheer isolation of the Earth become plain to every man, whatever his nationality or creed, and a new idea as powerful as any in history will be let loose. (9-10)

The image has been adopted by postcolonialist and cosmopolitanist thinkers like Paul Gilroy and Gayatri Spivak as the icon of a planetary way of thinking that transcends the technoscientific imperialism of the cartographic globe and its contemporary avatar, the gridworks of Geographical Information Systems. One could dwell a long while on the image of the Blue Marble—how it captures the feeling of a beautiful planet (not a sublime one, let us note, since the cropping limits the infinities of space) that can be seen to be desirable, vulnerable, and the object of a certain potential nostalgia, since it can now be photographed by human technology no longer bound to it. As Hoyle understood, it is important that it is a photograph, not a painting: this assures us that we are admiring the real planet, not an imagined one, and so must face its reality. It is small, all alone in the frame, without a moon, without a solar system, without a galaxy. It is, by implication, us. Its implicit message is that earth is coherent, unitary, and lovely, and most of all that the divisions of our social world are unnatural and transient—imaginary, even delusional. Entirely implicit and indeed unconscious is the position of the gazer. Nothing marks the standpoint. Even when we know it is an astronaut’s camera eye, the framing, the moonlessness, the intimate proximity create the sense of rapt, indeed

trapped, wonder, somewhere between that of 2001's Star Child and that of a marooned cosmonaut. I would argue that this icon complements the effect of the Sputnik in 1957; together they create what I would call the perspective of "middle extraterrestriality" as a real material experience: the construction of a real space suspended between the void on the one hand, and home, on the other.

Another, more recent shot from space is one of the many "the earth at night" series, showing the concentrations of energy use visible in the night hemispheres (figure 2). Taken from the International Space Station, this is



*Fig. 2: Earth at Night.* NASA Earth Observatory/NOAA NGDC

a more consciously political image. It is more precise and factual than grid images, because it shows human energies—the transformation of the natural One World into the globe of unevenly distributed power in the Anthropocene. Compared with the Blue Marble’s solid perspective, it approaches the vortical perspective of Wells’s Martians—but in this case the Martians are us, gazing at our resources and their exploitation. Here the one world is not an alien world, a single divine Gaian cell, with transcendent integrity; it is complex, striated, a dynamic network of power-nodes made possible by the luxuriance of the technosphere. Indeed, these are the images of the world as a global technosphere—the position of “near extraterrestriality,” the Space Station’s eye-view.

The social historian Benedict Anderson has argued that the realistic novel and newspapers had a central role in creating modern national consciousness. These forms of public discourse became vehicles of national unification; audiences were collected and oriented toward a metropolitan, bourgeois perspective while reading the dialects that were to become the official national languages. Novels and newspapers were essentially the vehicles of international modernization, on each nation’s own terms, pre-empting its colonial exploitation by the great powers.

In my view, science fiction took on a similar role in the second, accelerated, hypertechnological phase of European imperialism. SF emerged strong after the catastrophes of World War I by addressing not the traditional ruling castes, nor the merchant-adventurers, but a new elite. It spoke to aspiring engineers, scientists, and technicians, many of them immigrants to the hegemonic metropolises, many of them with no great allegiance to traditional systems of education and cultural privilege. “Science,” in the 1920s, became the institution and gnosis that could redeem the miserable failures of national projects. It is striking—especially after the technological barbarism of World War I—how much quasi-religious fervor went into visions of technoscientific salvation in Europe and the U.S.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century science fiction has been the main carrier of techno-imperial dreaming, as well as a main vehicle for its critique. Throughout the genre’s career we see imperial narratives of human expansionism, wars between civilizations, encounters with alien cultures. We see stories of ethical resistance to high-tech evil, and enormous ambivalence about the conflict between cultures. We see galactic federations, hegemonies, United Planets, inter-galactic commercial alliances. We see grand utopian visions of violence redeemed by astronomical harmony achieved; we see almost as many slave planets and resistance movements. We see cosmopolitan affinity groups. We rarely see nations or democracies. In other words, we see displacements of imperial politics and globalization, before the letter.

#### Part IV: SF: The Art of Empire.

In political terms, to imagine the world as a single political entity is imperial thinking.

John Rieder has definitively traced the way the genre of sf emerged from the colonial enterprises of the European great powers. What I'd like to add is how those colonial and imperialist competitions were propelled by a technological momentum. Once the dust settled after World War I, one of the most powerful geopolitical forces was technological innovation. Without advanced technologies, a nation had no hope of survival—politics had become technological. This ascension of technology to global power, irrespective of ideological differences as long as they did not hinder its development, led to the emergence of technocracies, to transnational communication networks, transnational institutions, and ultimately to a transnational capitalist class. This is the technoscientific empire in whose belly we dwell today, right here. Paradoxically, dialectically, maybe necessarily, this utopian convergence is the pretext for volatility on a scale never before seen on the human earth. Boundary breakdowns do not go only in one direction—alongside hybridity goes extinction, alongside fluidity goes catastrophe. The speed of the network's circulation surpasses human regulation and so creates the indeterminate vertigo of capitalism's ultimate dream: what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call "omnicrisis" (189). Each new crisis is an opportunity for what neocons like to call "creative destruction," as if they had unleashed Lord Shiva for their own benefit.

We might think it's inappropriate to call such a vertiginous global network dominated by a small class of oligarchs and technicians as an empire, but the class would not. Take for instance an ad, famous in the public relations world, for the company Computer Associates, titled "Empire" (2001). With allusions to Roman, British, and Wall Street empires and visual motifs from William Gibson's East Asian cities, exoticized colonial Mumbai, *Blade Runner's* futuristic LA, a bodyguard version of Morpheus from *The Matrix*, paparazzi flashes in the coliseum, a bridge from Rome to Manhattan, and...helicopters, it captures David Harvey's notion of neoliberalism's spacetime compression. The ad is jammed with the explicit signs of transnational, transtemporal imperial rule. Triumphant, high-speed, delirious, flattening out history, the ad constructs the avatar mask of a simulacral diva emperor—a face on the faceless circulation of data in cyberspace at nano-speed (Raley 112-15).

Crisis is the condition of being of neoliberalism. Each crisis brings new opportunities of commodification, of social control, of the opportunity to extend the network deeper and farther than it was before. When the system works perfectly, it produces more crisis. No biological culture can catch up to it. In 2000, US military spending was \$360 billion; in 2011, it was \$902 billion

(Robinson, “The Great Recession” 184). Between 2009 and 2011, 88% of the national income growth went to corporate profits, 1 % to wages (op. cit. 194). As early as 1994, the *daily* turnover at the ten biggest stock markets was estimated at a trillion dollars, compared with the daily world trade in real goods that same year of \$10 billion (Robinson and Harris 24). Real trade in actual services and goods was merely 1% of fictitious trade. The system produces fantastic wealth for those willing to risk the wealth and health of the biosphere. Everything that I just said has been in the domain of the sf imagination. Sometimes we see it in real-world political discourse, or when politicians, TED talkers, and pundits write their futuristic utopian visions of post-scarcity. We hear it more often when they imagine the catastrophes that this Networked Empire will visit on the poor old-fashioned meat-trapped humans—the exclusion of masses of human beings from productive labor, mass stupefaction, climatic disasters and extinctions, genocidal competition for resources, world famines, epidemics, *Who Fears Death*, *The Windup Girl*, *River of Gods*, *12 Monkeys*, *Soylent Green*, *Earth Abides*.

Arguably, it is sf that has made imagining these things its job; and in its turn, sf has inspired the invention, discovery, and application of the very conditions it imagines.

### Part V- The Imperial Audience.

The waves are coming in faster now, in more ways than one. In this last section I thought about connecting blockbuster sci-fi films to Roman blood-games. Then I thought I would praise the virtues of indies, like *Primer*, *Bedwin Hacker*, and *The Cosmonaut*. Then, having attended some thrilling panel discussions, I thought I would add my two cents about the crisis in finding a durable method for resisting domination; some wise asides about the internal fission of post-colonial theory—and the ultimate untenability of the posthuman; how the cyborg can be seen as the model imperial subject. But I kept coming back to Gary Wolfe’s question on the first day of the conference: do critics and scholars have a moral obligation to address the weight of empire? I think the answer is yes. We shouldn’t fiddle while we burn. The empire of neoliberal finance capitalism is not like any other. It has extended far beyond any previous regime, and to places once thought unimaginable. It is quickly reaching the ecological limits of the earth and wiping out species, food, and people at an accelerating rate. The magnitude of the means of violence and control at its disposal is unprecedented. The means of consciousness production are concentrated in the hands of a very few oligarchs. This empire is reaching the limits of its external expansion and turning increasingly toward the direct penetration of human minds. More than half the world’s population—maybe more—is being excluded from productive labor, subjected to what William Robinson calls the “mortal cycle of dispossession—exploitation—exclusion” (*Global Capitalism*

58). No sovereignty has the jurisdiction or power to limit this force. One could go on. In the face of this empire, it is not our self-definition that is at stake, or even our identities, but our existence. So to answer Gary's question: know the sitch, tell the truth, don't get distracted, and stay awake. And for the writers: be the unacknowledged legislators you are supposed to be. Imagine the resistance for us. Imagine some way out of here.

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