REVIEW-ESSAYS

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Who Framed Science Fiction?

Peter Stockwell. *The Poetics of Science Fiction*. Harlow, UK: Longman, 2000.
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First published in 2000, Peter Stockwell's *The Poetics of Science Fiction*
remains the most interesting book-length discussion of linguistics and sf since
Walter E. Meyers's *Aliens and Linguistics* (1980). That's not actually saying
much, since very little work on the subject has appeared since then. More
relevant is that Stockwell's book is also the first sustained attempt to go beyond
the two dominant models of a poetics of sf—Samuel R. Delany's notion of sf's
reading protocols and Darko Suvin's notion of cognitive estrangement.
    Meyers's book is still useful and entertaining, but it is somewhat old-
fashioned and anchored in the genteel philological tradition concerned with the
evolution of language. For Meyers, actually existing sf is a museum of folly
about the real language. The genre has unique potential to show how language
might behave under the changed conditions of the future, on other worlds, or in
alien minds; but most sf writers, in Meyers's view, depict alien and future
languages with much less knowledge and concern than they do the physics and
biologies of their imaginary worlds. Nothing marks Meyers's nostalgia for the
philological better than his plea to regard *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55) as a
work of sf because of Tolkien's construction of the Elvish tongue on principles
as rigorously faithful to evolutionary linguistics as Hal Clement was to physics
in *Mission of Gravity* (1953). In the age of the Klingon Language Institute, we
need to cast the net wider.
    Stockwell begins from very different premises. Instead of measuring how
adequate sf is to historical linguistics, he uses sf to illuminate how readers of
fiction convert linguistic cues into fictive contexts. Like Meyers, he intends his
book to do double-duty, using linguistics to explain the way sf is read, and sf to
theorize a poetics of reading. He works, for the most part, within the theoretical
framework of cognitive rhetoric most closely associated with the work of Robin
Lakoff and Mark Turner. Cognitive poetics, by extension, must be concerned
the relationship between human mental operations and the basic operations of
literary language. Stockwell is not all that clear about this. His closest
approximation to a definition is that poetics is "the linguistic and cognitive
organization of the genre" (3). I'm not sure exactly what this means; I assume
he means it is a practice, in which imagination, reflection and social conventions
reveal their inextricable connections. One thing it clearly does not include in
Stockwell's formulation is the notion of an artist, or, for that matter, a critic.
    Stockwell starts out with something of a polemic:

> A scientific poetics of literature, informed by modern linguistics, can do
> everything that literary criticism can do, with the advantage that it is rigorously
> analytical, differentiates between interpretations and reflecting on them, and it
> is open to informed debate. Only some literary criticism is able to do this....
> (Ibid.)

Far from being a mechanical application of technical concepts, this sort of
linguistic analysis is, Stockwell claims, a far more flexible discipline than
technically ungrounded interpretation.

> The same piece of science fiction can look quite different depending on which
> level of analysis is applied to it. This is because a thorough poetics is not about
> accounting for the text on its own and fixing a description of it; it is about
> finding and exercising fruitful ways of understanding how science fiction works
> as a reading experience. Literary linguistics is not dissection; it is yoga.... (Ibid.)

Perhaps this means that, like a yoga, a scientific poetics uses specific
postures as a way to make reveal and cultivate the intimate connections between
the textual body and the organized consciousness.

For Stockwell, sf is uniquely suited for cognitive analysis because its
characteristic language puts a premium on plausibility, while continually
referring to unreal referents. At the level of words and sentences, readers
construct contextual frames that resemble their familiar experience of reality.
This inertial tendency to expend the least cognitive effort (i.e., to treat all
reference as if it were to reality) is constantly roused by information that does
not fit into familiar frames. Linguists speak of a class of words, called deictic
terms, that serve to anchor readers within a given frame of reference. Stockwell
argues that the commonly held notions of deixis need to be modified, since they
are based on the realistic assumption that words in fiction act the way they do
in everyday discourse. In sf, these anchoring terms refer again and again to
objects, temporal, and spatial domains, agents, etc. that are markedly different
from those of real experience. Out of these "alternativity markers" readers of
sf construct imaginary contexts (the future, "old futures" that have been made
obsolete and symbolic, alternative historical lines, parallel universes, aliens,
androids, utopias, etc.) that appear *plausible*.

Because sf's language is so close to realistic discourse, it operates vis-à-vis
reading in general the way sf's neologisms and neosemes (i.e., words that have
taken on new meanings) operate in normal sentences. Readers of sf need to
expend relatively little effort to activate the operations that Stockwell finds most
interesting in cognitive poetics: reference without referents, construction of
belief-frames and imaginary world building, large-scale metaphors and models,
neologisms and the back-filling of context—all of which demonstrate the
preferability of a synthetic social constructionist model of both language and
genre rather than a philological, historicist one.

I confess that, though I am professionally interested in the idea of a poetics
of sf, I don't know much about linguistics, and I am never sure what the word
cognitive means when used in cognitive studies. (Sometimes it seems to refer to

thinking, sometimes to learning, sometimes to consciousness, but maybe it's something else altogether.) Stockwell's argument is not reader-friendly (well, friendly to *me*), which is surprising in a book so (theoretically) reader-centered. Rather than presenting a sustained, progressive argument, Stockwell zigzags between what he calls "Micrological" and "Macrological" chapters, reflecting different levels of analysis—the Micrological chapters focusing on the mechanics of language within texts, the Macrological on broader historical, contextual connections. Each chapter also includes short sections called "explorations" and "speculations" that act as assignments in thought-experiment. (These thought-experiments are the most engaging parts of *Poetics*, not incidentally bringing into relief Stockwell's *writerly* power to stimulate readers to do what readers do.)

Of his two tasks—using sf to illuminate linguistics and using linguistics to illuminate sf—Stockwell is much more successful with the first. Many chapters are barely more than expositions of rhetorical terminology, and Stockwell's reform taxonomy of deictic categories is mighty dry stuff. But he has a gift for examples, and he draws on wide and informed readings of sf to illustrate his ideas. For myself, the most useful thread is Stockwell's exposition of sf's use of constitutive metaphors and their amplification into structural "architexts." Metaphors are mapping puzzles. They usually map something familiar onto something unfamiliar, establishing that the two dissimilar structures are isomorphic at some particularly meaningful, "salient" points. In sf Stockwell also finds a different sort of metaphor where this relation is reversed, i.e., the unfamiliar is mapped onto the familiar, creating the sense of estrangement and of creative construction simultaneously—as in the oft-invoked opening line of *Neuromancer* (1984), "The sky above the port was the color of a television tuned to a dead channel."

> The most readily accessible reading that resolves this metaphor is simply that the sky is a grey colour. But the metaphor also suggests that televisions are more basic and natural than sky. The "pathetic fallacy" of mainstream literature, whereby nature imitates human emotions, is reversed so that nature is alien and technology is familiar and comforting. This is further reinforced by mapping the attribute of a capacity for life onto the "channel," which is "dead." The potential for life is claimed for technology. (201-02)

In Stockwell's view, sf characteristically produces *constitutive isomorphisms,* metaphors in which "the isomorphism is seen as the only way to represent the target concept" (203). These figures are particularly appropriate for describing very abstract or unfamiliar objects. Here is where sf's special cognitive power comes into focus. Stockwell claims that sf readers' familiarity with such constitutive isomorphisms carries over into their imaginative engagement with reality.

> Since every science fictional text (by definition) has an element of alternativity about it which differentiates it from our reality, any reading of a science fiction narrative involves an act of generic isomorphism between the real world and the text world. And if ... every isomorphism has the capacity for re-framing our

views of categories in the universe by being at some level constitutive, then science fiction possesses a fundamentally powerful capacity for altering readers' perceptions and habits of interpretation. If ... the "flow" of information in isomorphism is two-way and interanimating, this means that the constitutive patterns in science fictional reading are brought back to habits of reading and interpreting in reality. (203)

Sf specializes in producing large-scale metaphoric structures that engage the reader in mapping the whole text on the reader's whole world. These *architexts* configure "a fully worked-out, rich world, and also [provide] stylistic cues that encourage a mapping of the *whole* textual universe with the reader's reality" (204). They are the utopias, dystopias, and apocalypses of sf. (Stockwell also suggests yet another form of heterotopia, the *ergodic architexts* of games and interactive fiction.)

The genre's popularity and influence is an important aspect of its cognitive status. They indicate that the cognitive work of reading sf does not require elite training in interpreting complex texts. In developing this thread, Stockwell reveals a streak of populist empiricism that is rather less useful and persuasive than the textual thread.

The centrality of the reader is affirmed right at the start, when Stockwell rejects any categorical definition that might have come from the critical heavens. He applies instead Lakoff's notion of the prototype effect: people normally classify things by comparing them with prototypes they shape from their experience. Sf, then, is a fluid concept that varies from person to person, although it becomes increasingly refined as folks have more experience reading sf: "different people will have different ideas of which texts count as science fiction. Different readers will have different ideas of what criteria are more or less important in that decision. And their decisions will depend on how much experience they have of reading science fiction" (7). This begs the question of what it is that readers are getting more experience of, but one can easily answer it by supplying the consensus of masses of such readers. A fluid social definition has a lot to recommend it, but there is always the risk of exaggerating one part of a dialectic and distorting the whole picture.

Stockwell consistently voices his distaste for esoteric theories, educated taste, postmodern criticism, and indeed for any writer-centered literary theory that would grant authority to the folks producing the copy. Can authors really be bracketed out of the creative process so thoroughly? As they read, don't readers also model the writer in their imaginations, using that model to generate the sense of creativity and imagination as an active process? Stockwell approaches style, the most author-centered aspect of writing, as a social-historical question; the changes in sf style, from the "pulpstyle" to cyberpunk, reflect changes in the audiences to which the texts were addressed. His resistance to elitist literary values leads Stockwell into something of a double-bind: for education (including a good course in linguistics) seems to refine readers' experience of the genre and their recognition of those science-fictional qualities in texts that Stockwell's book isolates. Despite the populism of the prototype effect, *The Poetics of Science Fiction* is a disguised book-length

section on sf styles, Stockwell describes an experiment he conducted on some of his students to elicit the values they associated with certain styles. The results demonstrate that educated students consider the pulpstyle inferior and incompetent; they do not demonstrate, as Stockwell implies, that this makes them elitist.)

The inspiration for much of Stockwell's approach is Delany's claim that sf is capable of generating many more kinds of meaningful sentences than "mainstream" or "mundane" literature. Neither Delany nor Stockwell ever clearly defines what they consider to be "mainstream." Delany often writes as if there were only two kinds of sentences: sf and not-sf (or "literature"); Stockwell, too, makes only fleeting mentions of other specific genres. Such a crude, dualistic distinction can have only limited benefit. Where does *The Golden Ass* (c. 150) fit in this scheme? *The Tempest* ? *Maldoror*? *Bleak House?* *The Tin Drum*? How do the sentences of surrealists, oneiric fantastists, self-confessed mythomanes, hallucinators, ravers, and writers of the many fluid hybrids of the fantastic compare with those of sf? This is less of a problem for Stockwell than for Delany, since he finds sf useful precisely because it is so similar to realism. (For Delany the whole distinction falls apart, when he confesses to reading Jane Austen as if she were an sf writer.) Yet it is surely time to think about sf with a richer conception of literature than this.

In a curt review in *Foundation* (#81 [Spring 2001]: 114-16), Patrick Parrinder criticizes Stockwell for playing fast and loose with his material. Treating poetics in purely descriptive and quasi-scientific linguistic terms and ignoring the age-old topics of narrative and plot, mimesis, and dramatic action is for Parrinder purely *pseudo*-scientific posturing. Parrinder is unfair, I think—not mainly to Stockwell himself (who could have done a better job perhaps) but to the very different notion of poetics that Stockwell derives from cognitive linguistics. The relationship between models and metaphors has been one of the most interesting areas of the philosophy of mind and science at least since Max Black laid out the problem area in *Models and Metaphors* (1962). Though the language and testing that cognitive linguists may use to analyze these tropes may seem alien to aesthetics, the problem they describe is valuable for understanding how people make sense of fictions in the first place. "Cognitive poetics"—an oxymoron no more extreme than "science fiction" itself—might be a bridge between the study of how people process information into knowledge through conceptual tropes and how people construct meaning in art. In *The Poetics of Science Fiction*, Peter Stockwell demonstrates that sf can have an important role to play in that study.