

“Where’s the Sci-Fi:
The Relationship Between Trends in
Science Fiction and Modern History”
by Heidi Wessman Kneale

In The Beginning

Since the Dawn of Humanity, mankind has looked to the stars and wondered. They came up with reasons and explanations as to where the sun went at night, and more. They developed mythologies inspired by a need to figure out their world. A few early civilizations, such as the Greek, started to discover the wonders of science, but for the most part, mankind’s cultures remained with their mythologies to explain the world around them. For centuries, myths and guesses were all Mankind had to explain the world around them.

In the wake of the European Renaissance came a scientific explosion. Mankind, once again, looked to the stars but this time, tried to come up with plausible explanations as to why things were the way they were. They also looked at the world around them. Why did that apple fall from the tree? Why does a piece of glass, ground a certain way, make things look larger, and now that I can see that small item better, why is it constructed the way it is?

The speculations and discoveries of science paved the way to a technology revolution. The 18th Century saw a plethora of inventions, from little things that made everyday life easier, like the flying shuttle loom, to ground-breaking discoveries, like the piston steam engine, which completely changed the face of industry and travel.

The speed at which new technology was introduced must have been breathtaking for everyone. Some of these people looked at how life once was, how life was now, and they imagined what life could have been, for

good or ill. In 1744 German astronomer Eberhard Christian Kindermann wrote a novel speculating about traveling to Mars. In 1751 Ralph Morris published “The Life and Astonishing Transactions of John Daniel”, where the main character Daniel invented a flying machine. These novels were early attempts at a fiction speculating about the role of science--science fiction.

Science and Technology Take Hold

The advance of science continued into the 19th Century. By now, the concept of science and technology was firmly ingrained in the public conscious. Many began to question not the validity of science, but what would happen when such powers were left, unguided, unguarded in the hands of Mankind.

On a particular week in June 1816, several writers, including Percy Bysshe Shelley and his wife Mary Shelley, got together to dream up ghost stories. Everyone came up with tales to chill the heart, but Mary was at a loss for a tale. She, as she explains in the preface to the 1831 edition of “Frankenstein”, had a “waking dream” (nightmare) where she saw “the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together”. From this inspiration, she wrote “Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus”, arguably the first truly Science Fiction novel. It was first published in 1819.

The middle of the 19th Century saw a boom in literary works inspired by science. Authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe and Jules Verne created works that, by today’s classifications, are considered pure science fiction. These works were not treatises on current science but rather treatises on the philosophical states

of man, as per the prevalent literary tradition.

By the 1860s, science and technology had infiltrated into everyday life. Steel enabled stronger and better machines. Locomotives, the typewriter and the telegraph entered common use. Every decade brought greater technological miracles. Photography. Electric lights. Automobiles. Science and technology were no longer these vast mysteries to be investigated only by an intrepid few, but had become the servants of Mankind.

The nature and themes of science fiction changed to reflect this attitude. Many of Jules Verne's works reflect the theme of "technology as a tool". Many of his "extraordinary voyage" novels reflected traveling through space ("From the Earth to the Moon", 1865), through the sea ("Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea", 1870) and through the air ("Five Weeks in a Balloon" 1863), back when such travel was uncommon or implausible, but not unimaginable.

By the turn of the century, not only was science and technology commonplace, but its advancement was expected. World Fairs displayed the latest inventions, intrepid explorers traveled the world in the new automobiles, and countless people benefited from medical advancements in surgery and immunizations. Science and technology were here to stay. It was time, Mankind decided, to become "Modern" and "move into the Twentieth Century".

It became a reckless time. Travel was the easiest it had ever been in the history of the world. Science began to replace faith and speculation of the unknown in the hearts of many. H.G. Wells, considered the "father of science fiction", explored themes of adventure and the advancement of science in many of his novels.

Likewise, Edgar Rice Burroughs wrote about adventure and travel to distant places, most notably the "Barsoom" series

about Earth's closest potentially inhabitable neighbor, Mars.

In the decade of 1910, Mankind thought he was unstoppable. The idea of "Utopia", often dreamt and written about in the 19th Century, seemed to be coming true. The quality of life improved. Wells wrote "The Modern Utopia" in 1905.

Then came World War I, the "War to end all Wars", with its advanced weaponry, its chemical warfare, air warfare and terrible death toll. At the same time, the Spanish Flu epidemic killed millions more than the war. Mankind was humbled by these two terrible tragedies, one displaying just how terrible technology could be in the hands of man, while the other proved that for all his scientific learning, he was still vulnerable. E.M. Forster, normally a "mainstream" writer, penned "The Machine Stops", a story of technology and Utopia gone too far, and how a simple, uncontrollable event destroyed it all.

The Pulp Era

The social trauma of World War I affected the psyche of all nations involved. While some cultures, namely those of war-torn Europe plunged themselves into communist, fascist or socialist movements, with an unhealthy dose of nihilism thrown in, the United States held a dramatically different view.

It was the Roaring Twenties, with prosperity and a hedonistic sense of happy-go-luckiness for all. Pulp magazines were all the rage and science fiction, in the form of short stories and serials, found a ready audience. Instead of belonging to "literature", science fiction began to belong to the people, to become "popular". The magazine "Amazing Stories" edited by Hugo Gernsback, debuted in 1926, making science fiction easily accessible.

Cinema, into its third decade, became

an idea medium for science fiction. While the US enjoyed serials such as Flash Gordon, Europe indulged in masterpieces such as Metropolis, which reflected its post-war mood.

The concepts of the robot and the rocket ship emerge. Karel Čapek's play "R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)" written in 1920, could sum up Mankind's view of technology so far: servant of man. However, Čapek also puts up a mirror. The robots are treated poorly by humans. When they are empowered (ie given emotions) to know good from evil, they rebel and kill the humans. Again, the classic theme of reflection of the consequences of technology in the hands of mankind presents itself.

With the end of the twenties came the end of the "good times". The 1930s brought a world-wide financial depression. Science fiction changed, once again. Instead of the social reflections of the early 19th Century, the amazement of technology in the late 19th Century and the sense of adventure in the early 20th, it became a refuge, an escape from the drudgery and misery of the Depression.

During this decade, pulp magazines ruled. Joe Average couldn't afford to purchase novels, but he could scrape together a few cents for a copy of "Astounding" or "Doc Savage", and thus escape his hum-drum life. Superman and Batman were created. Adventure continued to reign supreme.

Pulp magazines were never meant to be great literary masterpieces. The stories were written quickly and meant to be read quickly, with little thought given to their literary merit--a quick hit for a science fiction fix. The covers themselves were sensational and arguably exploitative full-color illustrations often depicting Varga-esque women at the mercy of Martians or Robots or some other unnamed horror. Someone had to rescue them, and who better, within his own imagination, than a teenage boy? It is more

these covers than the contents or quality of the stories that led "proper society" to question the moral validity and acceptance of "sci-fi".

Cinema fared better with Buck Rogers and King Kong, featuring then-stunning special effects.

Because of the popularity of science fiction, fan clubs sprung up and the first World Science Fiction conventions were held. Part of the reason that science fiction was so popular during the Depression could be that it was a forward-looking genre, hoping for a better future. The Futurians, a fan organization, formed in New York City. Some of its members became influential science fiction writers: Issac Asimov, Damon Knight, Frederik Pohl.

The Golden Age

1941 was a good year for the science fiction serials with as many as 100 individual issues on a newsstand. Many of the "great names" of science fiction were published at this time. Even today, more than sixty years later, every fan is familiar with the names of Issac Asimov, Ray Bradbury and Robert A. Heinlein.

After the Depression and with the onset of war, people needed, more than ever, a way to escape and science fiction provided that.

For the second time this century, war threatened Europe. For many people, World War II was a scary time. It seemed not just Europe but the whole of the world was plunged into war. Pearl Harbor was attacked, and as an indirect result, many of the war industries on the continental US were moved far, far inland and many American were imprisoned by their fellow citizens simply because of their Japanese heritage. Australia seriously feared invasion and Great Britain suffered terrible bombings.

Then came the horror of the nuclear bomb as the United States unleashed its most terrible weapon upon Japan.

The speculations of science fiction seemed to be coming true, almost outpacing the imaginations of the writers, as it seemed that technology was outpacing its creators. It scared many people.

Science fiction took on a paranoid tone. It drifted away from the gadgetry of the adventure era and evolved more into a “social science fiction”, as Issac Asimov described it. It became more introspective, looking into the state of the human condition. Who were we, it seemed to ask. How far is Mankind willing to go?

Robert A. Heinlein worked with social themes, exploring the potential of mankind, more than the potential of technology. In his 1940s’ novels his characters are usually young males (for example, Hamilton Felix of “Beyond This Horizon” and Matt Dodson of “Space Cadet”) who learn that the society they live in might not be all it’s cracked up to be. Social mores and the destructive potential of mankind are examined.

Television became the new entertainment medium and science fiction adapted to it as well. The British enjoyed “The Quatermass Experiment” while Americans tuned in regularly to “Captain Video”. Radio and film continued to portray science fiction. The highly-successful radio program “X Minus One” featured science fiction stories from Heinlein, Asimov and Fredrick Pohl.

Prosperity returned after the end of the War, and with it, the science fiction novel, almost with a vengeance. The pulp magazines declined in number, taking the quickly-written serial with it. Novels took on a more literary tone and became more suitable to adults rather than children.

Despite the public access via radio, film and television, the new literary trend in print science fiction moved it away from

public consumption and more towards the a developing science fiction culture, aka “the Fen”.

The Cold War

While the United States enjoyed a few years of relief and prosperity in the late 1940’s, the 1950’s brought a return of fear: the Cold War.

The United States had proven that it had nuclear weapons and was not afraid to use them. This caused panic in countries such as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR, including the current-day Russia) and other countries. This fear isolated the various nations and gave rise to what amounted to a barely-controlled panic.

The US had the “Red Scare” and McCarthyism. Patriotism and xenophobia reigned and this was reflected in science fiction. The general public preference turned to more “American” genres, like the Western, though “sci-fi” never really left the public conscience. This fear of invasion and aliens is portrayed in the movies of the time: “Invaders from Mars”, “War of the Worlds”, “Godzilla, King of the Monsters”, “Invasion of the Body Snatchers”, and “It Conquered the World”. The films reflected the science fiction styles of the Pulp era and not necessarily the science fiction being concurrently published. From the beginning to the current day, the science fiction in television and films would seem to be a decade or so behind the trends of the literary front.

In the literary side of science fiction writers indulged social science fiction. It pulled away from mainstream thought, which was plagued by the fear of appearing to be anything other than “Red-blooded American” and questioned society.

Robert Sheckley explored alternative social orders in many of his stories, often applying the balm of humor to counteract the air of fear so prevalent in society.

Because the American Public, who were raised during the Depression and who came of age during a time of war and the later xenophobia, had this desperate post-war need to become June Cleaver. Appearing “normal” and “patriotic” was practically an obsession and the thought of being “different” rattled them. Science fiction became regulated to a few “fringe” types and as a children’s genre, very much like fairy tales had been. It was no longer suitable for the average “grown-up”.

That all changed with the onset of the Space Age.

The Space Age and New Wave

Sputnik ignited everyone’s imaginations. People who read science fiction stories, especially the earlier pre-Golden Age adventures, marveled as they watched science fiction come true. Satellites, rockets, and astronauts were like these old stories coming true. Everyone who had access to a television watched men walking on the moon.

Science fiction resurged in the public conscience once more. A television show called “Star Trek” stirred many souls and the advent of the paperback novel made science fiction even more accessible to the average Joe.

The attitude of the 1960s rebelled against the stodginess of the 1950s. Flower Power, Social Consciousness and Liberation replaced the nervous fear of previous decades. Women discovered the Pill and burned their bras. People of Color rebelled against segregation and Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream. The social atmosphere seemed a complete change from the staid keeping up of appearances in the 1950s to outright rebellion and a push against the borders of propriety.

Science fiction authors took the attitude of this liberal decade and applied it to their works. They questioned authority and

boundaries. They experimented with style, with themes and social mores. This ‘soft’ science fiction focused more on the nature of man, rather than the nature of science and technology, as so much of the earlier science fiction focused on.

Heinlein explored alternative societal structures with “The Moon is a Harsh Mistress” and “Stranger in a Strange Land”. Ursula Le Guin explored sociological and feminist themes with “City of Illusions” and “The Left Hand of Darkness”. Frank Herbert’s Dune was published this decade and explored the consequences of Mankind’s choices, from the personal level to a galactic level, showing evolution, society and ecology inseparable and intertwined.

In the public conscience, science fiction started moving from a “kiddie” genre to one that an adult could openly admit to enjoying. Originally, “Doctor Who” was designed as a children’s program, but found its popularity more with adults.

Science fiction began to divide into subgenres: Hard SF, Soft (or Social) SF, Horror and Fantasy. Now known collectively as “speculative fiction”, the genre had expanded and had a significant population.

Fantasy started to come into its own. While Tolkien’s “Lord of the Rings” was published in the 1950s, it wasn’t until the New Wave of the 1960s that brought this more introspective subgenre to the fore. Fantasy started to match popularity with—and possibly outdo—science fiction in the 1970’s. Authors such as Le Guin, Stephen R. Donaldson, Terry Brooks and Patricia McKillip wrote fantasies to capture the imagination.

Little by little, fantasy started edging out science fiction.

The Technology Boom

The social conscience of the 1960s

and 1970s became replaced with a wild consumerism. The 1980s became the decade of personal technology: The PC, the Walkman, video cameras, VCRs and the early onset of the Internet. With this unprecedented boom of accessible technology, not to mention the approach of the 21st Century, the interest in science fiction resurged.

The subgenre Cyberpunk, starting with William Gibson's "Neuromancer" restored hard SF to the public conscience. Gibson coined the phrase "Cyberspace". While there was a resurgence of hard SF in literature, Fantasy continued to enjoy its popularity.

In film and television a subgenre called "new space opera" emerged. It had the same idealistic adventure feel as the early pulp stories of the 1920s and 1930s, but focused more on soft science fiction themes. They seemed to lack the "scienceness" of earlier works. The "Star Wars" series, "Star Trek: The Next Generation", "Battlestar Galactica" and "Buck Rogers in the 25th Century" are considered space opera.

A Dip in the Trend?

During the 1990s Fantasy exploded with hundreds of books being published, but science fiction, especially the hard science fiction seemed to not do so well. It thrived well on television and in the cinema (who continued the long tradition of running about a decade behind the literary trends), but not as popular on the shelves.

Cyberpunk came to the fore, offering a near-future technology-based dystopian view which reflected a potential direction the fast pace of technological development could be taking man. It posed the question of whether or not technology advanced so quickly that Mankind could not keep up. It suggested things could go terribly wrong.

Enter the Y2K bug. Instead of inspiring Mankind, it threw them into a panic. Billions were spent to prevent what might or might not have been a grave disaster.

The popularity of science fiction seemed to drop after that. Technology, for the average Joe, became either something to fear (like the Y2K bug) or so commonplace (like the home computer) it had lost its magic.

The Internet became not just a household name, but a household utility. Everyone was "browsing the web". The ideas of science fiction that were popular even a decade ago lost its "science fictionness" because of the speed of scientific advancement. A story of a cloned cat could have been a great science fiction story fifteen years ago, but today it's not a stretch of the imagination.

In science, while advances were made, especially in the area of genetics, the space race seemed to be over, thanks to two shuttle disasters and the prohibitive financial cost of space missions, especially since the results weren't significant enough to justify the layout. Aside of the occasional short-lived news stories of MIR or the occasional rich tourist wanting to hit orbit, it seemed the space race had stopped. Missions to Mars met with disasters and another Space Shuttle disaster, claiming more lives turned the American public off the thought of leaving the planet. Mankind seemed to develop more pressing closer-to-home issues, like global warming and wars of terror.

Yet looking to the past, one could extrapolate the future. While there may seem to be a decade of lull, after that decade something Dreadfully Exciting happens. (Aren't we due for another World War?)

One possible future technology that may reignite the public sense of adventure and bring back another resurgence of science fiction is the return of space travel.

In the past, one of the drawbacks of

space travel has been the high financial cost. Rockets and space shuttles were expensive to build and maintain. But thanks to the motivation of the Ansari X Prize (for the first non-government organization to launch a reusable manned spacecraft into space twice within two weeks) won by TierOne and their SpaceShipOne, commercial space flight for the rest of us within our lifetime is very possible.

The Future?

Where would science fiction be without a vision of the future? This genre is famous for looking ahead and wondering where--for good or ill--mankind may be. So look to the stars and continue to wonder. We don't know the course of the future but one thing is sure: it'll be a fascinating journey.

