1. Introduction: The Nearly Silent Listener

Abstract

It is possible to argue that we are now living in the future predicted by science fiction when it originally emerged as a literary genre in the mid twentieth century. This raises questions about the function of the genre now, a little over one hundred years since Mary Shelley first published *Frankenstein* and in a cultural milieu which increasingly questions scientific orthodoxy. This introduction to the second edition of Debra Benita Shaw's *Women, Science and Fiction* argues that, nevertheless, the imagined worlds of science fiction authors who identify as women have gained in significance in that, across the decades, they have continued to offer a penetrating analysis of gender and its importance in the perpetuation of social inequalities.

I have been announcing myself as a feminist for some forty years but I still remain uneasy about what the term implies, how my interlocuters receive it and what it means for them. Feminism has no straightforward interpretation. As these things are periodised, we are now in a 'fourth wave'; a resurgence of gender politics which has in common with other 'waves' a demand for rights, a claim for autonomy and a denouncing of masculine behaviour through which males achieve status by claiming possession of women. All this has happened before and will (to quote *Battlestar Galactica*) happen again (Larson, 2004 – 2009). Or will it?

I have been struck by the violence of the debates between the feminist old guard, who came to consciousness in the 1970s and 80s and their granddaughters in the new generation as well as between a cadre of cis-gendered activists and the trans-women whom they denounce. The question of who or what is a 'woman' and who is authorised to speak for and to women seems to be overwhelming the more important work of challenging the patriarchal social structures which, fundamentally, have defined these terms in the first place.

During these debates I have been engaged in revising my first book for republication. This is a book about science fiction, the women who write it and have written it and how they imagine gender in some future time, other place or re-imagined past. Not all would explicitly claim to be feminists. Some used male pseudonyms to gain publication in a very masculine dominated publishing fraternity. Most were, and are, fascinated by how science writes the world and how it might be written differently, from another perspective or with a different kind of knowledge. All, of course, are beneficiaries of what, in the original version of this book, I called the Frankenstein Inheritance - the legacy of Mary Shelley who dared to experiment with a body given form by other than heterosexual desire.

Re-reading the book that started as my doctoral thesis at the end of the twentieth century and that was published at the turn of the millennium, what strikes me is that, in some sense, all the stories and novels that I subjected to analysis are, in one way or another, describing the world that we now live in. This is not to claim that sf is prophetic or that these women are clairvoyant. What it points to is the fact that the concerns of these texts remain acutely relevant, as is demonstrated by the fact that novels from the early twentieth century are still in print and two that I discuss here have been adapted for radio and TV. Also, as sf critics well know, the genre, even in its most utopian form, is never really about the future but about opening gaps in time and space through which we might peer back at our own time and view it as if we were visiting an alien planet. The big question of sf is 'what if?', a question that is always addressed by employing scientific knowledge as what Ursula Le Guin calls a 'heuristic device' (Le Guin 1979, p. 163). So these writers ask: what if there were no

men? Or no gender? Or if sexuality were fluid? What if advanced prosthetics could furnish a brain with a new body? What if a robot could be designed to be a much better lover than any human male? They have even asked: what if there were no women (or none that we would recognise as such)? What if race were no longer a source of conflict in the world? And what if women were to develop a form of defence against masculine power that meant that they could no longer be raped?

My point here is that all these questions are germane to contemporary concerns but all the texts to which they refer were written across a span of roughly one hundred years. There are no 'waves' in feminist or gender oriented science fiction, just a constant rehearsal of the questions that have obsessed people who identify as human females for centuries, looked at through the perspective of what might become possible, given a set of contingent circumstances.

My original intention, when I published the first version of this book, was to make explicit the scientific sub-text of the works I had selected for analysis. My aim was to demonstrate that women given the opportunity to imagine new worlds based in known scientific ideas could be read as responding to their own marginalised position by challenging the tired gender stereotypes of the traditional genre. I gave myself the freedom to ignore the intentions of the author in favour of a reading that located the text within the cultural preoccupations of the time of writing. I wanted to explore science fiction as an enabling form; as a genre that, in requiring sub-textual reference to specific ideas, provided the opportunity to challenge the way that gender is assumed in the practice and application of science. I followed Brian Aldiss (1988) in accepting that Shelley probably inaugurated the genre but I also wanted to establish *Frankenstein* as the first sf novel concerned with the effects of scientific innovation specifically on the lives of women.

In her introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, Shelley described how she was motivated to write the novel. In the summer of 1816, she and Shelley 'visited Switzerland, and became the neighbours of Lord Byron' (Shelley 1969, p. 6). Also present was Byron's secretary, Polidari. The weather being particularly bad, they spent much of their time reading ghost stories and agreed that each would attempt a story of their own. Mary was lost for ideas until a particular night when a discussion between Byron and Shelley fired her imagination:

> Many and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley, to which I was a devout but nearly silent, listener. During one of these, various philosophical doctrines were discussed and among others the nature of the principle of life, and whether there was any possibility of its ever being discovered and communicated. They talked of the experiments of Dr [Erasmus] Darwin ...who preserved a piece of vermicelli in a glass case, till by some extraordinary means it began to move with voluntary motion. Not thus, after all, would life be given. Perhaps a corpse would be re-animated; galvanism had given token of such things; perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together and endued with vital warmth.

Shelley then goes on to describe how, once in bed, she 'did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the normal bounds of reverie (pp. 8 – 9).

What struck me here was Mary's silence; the fact that she took no substantial part in the discussions on the fateful night but that she nevertheless contributed and in such a way that she, although she obviously did not know it at the time, founded a literary genre. I was also struck by the fact that she seems to almost want to relinquish responsibility for the tale. She claims that it as a gift of her imagination, rather than a product of conscious thought; as if she could not possibly be responsible

for such an audacious proposition. This, for me, exemplified the position of women in relation to the subject matter of science fiction.

When I published the first edition of this book, it was still possible to argue for a distinction between sf and fantasy where sf could claim to be a literature of scientific realism. Fantasy, on the other hand, was understood to be more akin to myth and more invested in inventing worlds than in extrapolating new futures for *this* one. However, as my final chapter for this edition illustrates, this now seems like a naïve point of view in that it not only assumes a shared reality which the extrapolation exposes or explores but privileges a literary technique founded in the methods and claims of Western science. Nevertheless, the fact remains that, for much of the historical period that I have been examining, women in the West have continued to occupy Shelley's position of the 'nearly silent listener' in debates about the social effects of new technologies and the political implications of new descriptions of the physical world. The result has been some extraordinary fiction that, like *Frankenstein*, has not only stood the test of time but has become increasingly relevant as new technologies and ideas have impacted how we understand the world. While I agree that the division between sf and fantasy is limiting in the sense that it tends to privilege a particular story told about Western science and its effects in the world what remains crucial is to appreciate the very different stories that have emerged from the position of the nearly silent listener and their relevance as documents of feminist thought applied to science and technology.

Similarly, although what counts as 'science' in any given historical period needs to be interrogated, what remains relevant is that these are examples of imaginary worlds developed from the unique point of view of those with a great deal at stake in the future but who have largely been excluded from the debate. So, although *Herland* (Chapter 1) offers some difficult propositions about the future of eugenics, it is nevertheless an extraordinary document in terms of the way in which it utilises the theory of evolution to question the gender binary. And, given that we are now living in a period of global precarity in which a particular form of insecure masculinity threatens national security on all levels, *Swastika Night* (Chapter 2) should, I think, be required reading. Because these two chapters are only slightly shortened versions of the originals, I have included addenda at the end of each to contextualise them within contemporary debates.

For similar reasons, I have largely re-written my chapter on C L Moore's 'No Woman Born' (Chapter 3) to further emphasise the way in which it appears to anticipate much later arguments about gender as a culturally conditioned performance rather than an innate attribute of bodies. Equally remarkable is the way in which it extends the debate to question the relationship between what it means to be human and the technological interfaces through which we experience the world. Although Moore ends her story by casting doubt on whether Deirdre will be able to continue to maintain relationships with her human friends this seems to me to be an unnecessary coda, perhaps added as a sop to the pulp readership that she was writing for. The most enjoyable part of the story is Deirdre's performance where she explores the aesthetics of cyborg ontology through a dance that goes beyond the range of human movement. What Moore seems to be suggesting is that it is not only the performance of gender but the performance of *human* that limits what we can imagine both in the realm of art and in the realm of politics.

These first three chapters are the only ones that have survived from the first edition. I have made the decision to omit four of the original chapters, largely because the novels and short stories that they discuss are out of print and also to make room for some important texts that were either not yet published when I wrote the first edition or that I ignored at the time because they were already well covered in the critical literature.

The most notable of these is, of course, Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (Chapter 4). I was motivated to include it in this edition largely because of the 2015 BBC Radio adaptation which sent me back to the novel with a new perspective. I had always read *LHD* as an extrapolation from the methods of anthropology; as a reflection on the masculine bias of the so-called 'human' sciences. What the radio adaptation made clear is that it is equally a novel about communication and about the media through which meaning is translated. It is also, of course, about extreme weather and thus, under current conditions of global heating, asks us urgently to examine how climate governs social structures. This chapter also enabled me to re-introduce some of my discussion of James Tiptree Jr's 'Your Haploid Heart' from the first edition. Both Tiptree and Le Guin were children of anthropologists and there are some interesting similarities in the way that they approach extrapolation. For both, the question of human ontology and its relationship with gender catagories is paramount.

Similarly, I was motivated to include an analysis of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (Chapter 5) following the extraordinary MGM/Hulu TV adaptation that premiered in 2017 and is in receipt of, currently, fifteen Emmy awards. What particularly interested me was the way in which the narrative easily translated to a contemporary setting, as if Atwood had anticipated the world of social media and the way in which it has exposed the violence at the heart of gender relations. The handmaid's costume, a symbol of both restriction and high visibility, has been a gift to women in movement against increasingly draconian restrictions in the US, particularly as related to abortion and the right to choose. The power of the novel then is in the meaning that it has lent to a simple red cloak and white bonnet. It stands alongside *Swastika Night* as one of the most uncompromising feminist dystopias. It not only proposes that, under the right political conditions, women who congratulate themselves on their autonomy and freedom could find themselves stripped of citizenship and enslaved but, again like *Swastika Night,* it emphasises the potential for women ourselves to collude with an oppressive regime.

This is also emphasised in Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (Chapter 6), a title which alludes both to the genetic mutation which gifts women a weapon to protect themselves against assault and to the political changes this enables and through which certain women become dangerously powerful. *The Power* is very much a novel for a post-truth world, directly referencing the form of digital communication as consequential in the dissemination of damaging popular mythologies and demonstrating the ease with which new power makes use of old discourses. Like *LHD, The Power* is framed by a report from a future world in which we are disappointed to find that old power imbalances still pertain but, this time, the genders have simply swapped positions. Alongside this, the text performs a skillful critique of bias in the scientific method, introducing 'ancient' artefacts (some of which are consumer products from our current time) the uses of which are surmised on the basis of gendered historical assumptions. There are similarities here with *Herland* in that Alderman has fun at the expense of her future scientists, gravely pronouncing that an iPad has something to do with serving food in the same way that Gilman obviously enjoyed confronting her explorers with women who had no concept of romantic love. In both cases, the world of the text functions to interrogate scientific realism but whereas this allows Gilman to expose her Herlanders as utopian 'new' women, Alderman employs the technique to expose how ideology structures power relations beyond the gender divide. As women have gained the advantage in physical power so, the text illustrates, they have gained the power also to determine what stands as truth.

Both *THT* and *The Power* feature reflexive voices speaking to us from far futures in which the time of the narrative has become ancient history. Notably, in both cases, the future world is a thinly veiled version of the time of the novel's production. These voices have a dual function. They both allow for

an exposition of the critique that the text performs and for a reflection on historicity, particularly as it relates to sf. As Sherryl Vint points out, '[t]he rhetorical conflation of technological innovation with progress writ large emerged alongside genre sf' (Vint 2021, p. 33). The result is that it has generally been read as future history concerned with the social effects of innovation. But postmodernity has put an end to confidence in the future trajectory of history, essentially also closing off the future as the space which authors could imaginatively occupy in order to gain perspective for a critical evaluation of their own time. Nearly all the major theorists of postmodernity at some point turn to sf to emphasise the way that, in David Harvey's words 'the future has come to be discounted into the present'. Harvey suggests this is marked by a 'collapse of the cultural distinctions between … 'science' and 'regular' fiction' (Harvey 1990, p. 281), Fredric Jameson suggests, similarly, that 'science fiction … turns into mere "realism" and an outright representation of the present' (Jameson 1991, p. 286). And, for Jean Baudrillard, writing for *Science Fiction Studies* in 1991, the conquest of space marked a turning point at which 'the era of hyperreality ha[d] begun'. What he calls the 'pantographic exuberance which made up the charm of SF [is] now', as he says, 'no longer possible' (Baudrillard 1991, p. 311).

Aside from the fact that we now live in the future that sf predicted and it is proving less than utopian, popular culture is now so thoroughly saturated with sf imagery that our world is largely experienced through representations drawn from the way the future was imagined in the past. 'Daily life', according to Vint, 'can … at times seem like visions from the pulp sf of the 1920s and 1930s' (Vint 2021, p.1), and sf writer Kim Stanley Robinson, in an article for *Nature*, offers that '[w]e are now living in a science fiction novel that we are all writing together' (Robinson 2017, p. 330). As Vint suggests, one of the functions of sf has been supposedly to 'prepare us for the future' (Vint 2021, p. 53) but, in contemporary culture, 'advertisers embrace sf imagery to make their products seem to usher in the world promised by technophilic stories' (p. 13). In other words, the genre's speculative orientation and its association with the promise of modernity has been hijacked to prepare us for the future of consumer capitalism.

Vint also points to the fact that sf has become important for securing research funding for new products (p. 47) and that it has increasingly influenced design. This is particularly evident in the devices that we now use in everyday life which seem to have first appeared in early series of *Star Trek.* If you are designing, for instance, a personal communication device it would seem sensible to mimic a model that *Star Trek* has already made highly desirable (the flip phone). Similarly, if you want to design a device that captures valuable data and, to that end, encourages people to communicate with it frequently (smart speakers), it makes sense to produce and market something that has already captured consumers' imaginations and that feeds the desire for the kind of future that *Star Trek* offered [1]. We don't yet have flying cars but we do have replicators (3D printers) and, as computer games become more sophisticated and incorporate VR we are on the way to a full blown version of *TNG's* holodeck.

The sf of the early to mid twentieth century, from which most of these devices are derived, was characterised by what Patricia Monk has called 'the androcentric mystique … a literary mystique characterised by gadgetry, adventure and androcentric thinking' (Monk 1980, p. 16). The inheritance of this is gender bias built into the technologies that we now rely on to manage our home, work and social lives. This is alluded to in the TV adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* which incongruously features a laptop computer that, it is suggested can, in the world it depicts, now only be used by certain privileged men (see Chapter 5). And, in both *The Power* (Chapter 6) and *The City We Became* (Chapter 7) contemporary communications devices are the channels through which particular forms of insidious evils make their way into the world.

Furthermore, as Liz W. Faber discovered in her analysis of the computer's voice, acousmatic computers in the early twenty-first century have been almost exclusively gendered female, largely because computers in sf have been represented as 'both houses and wives/mothers – literal housewives' (Faber 2020, p. 142). As she notes, films like Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) in which the central character falls in love with a female voiced computer are not science fiction because they are created for 'an audience that [already] has access to voice-interactive software' but they nevertheless 'use the same narrative and conceptual techniques as previous SF texts by situating acousmatic computers into preexisting gender and narrative contexts' (p. 166). So, we could say that, in general, what we might call gadget oriented sf can no longer be read through extrapolation. What we are left with is a form of fiction that, like *Her* might be called critical realism but which nevertheless fails to question the persistence of the androcentric mystique.

Similarly, sf criticism has, somewhat belatedly, recognised the tacit acceptance of Western imperialism which is a structural property of the majority of sf texts. As Gerry Canavan puts it, 'the imperial-turn critics of SF excavate the racist and colonialist assumptions about difference that are not only evident in early entries in the genre but continue to structure creative production in the genre to this day' (Canavan 2017, p. 5). It may indeed be no accident then that a culture which seems to be attempting to live in the future imaginary of sf is one in which social media has provided space for expressions of both racism and misogyny that would not have been out of place in *Swastika Night*. As Jonathan Crary has argued 'the internet complex … disperses the disempowered into a cafeteria of separate identities, sects and interests and is especially effective at solidifying reactionary group formations' (Crary 2022, p. 11). As I suggest in Chapter 6, this is the subtext for *The Power* which is, ultimately, an argument for the impossibility of social change in a world that provides for the endless circulation of simulated models of power in a claustrophobic space which prohibits the imagination of an outside from which change might come. It is, in effect, an sf novel which employs extrapolation to model the end of the genre.

My claim then is that the time of sf is over. What I mean by this is not only that the concept of linear time on which it has traditionally depended is now thoroughly compromised but that the criteria that distinguished the genre and which governed the mode in which extrapolation functioned are now no longer sustainable. The long debates over what is and what is not science fiction now seem to belong to the time of colonialist assumptions and to be part of the taxonomic ordering of the world which structured scientific imperialism. *The City We Became*, as my final chapter suggests, comes under the description of the Black Fantastic but it also falls under the conventions of the New Weird and Urban Fantasy. What it is *not* is science fiction and it is also not *feminist* science fiction. Although it features women as independent central characters it fantasises the tension between the everyday and the extraordinary as also a tension between a world in which gender makes sense and one in which a form of posthuman becoming makes nonsense of the categories through which we traditionally police both gender and race. And it demands that we understand the paramaters of genre as established under the same divisive epistemology that has governed the boundaries of the human under the terms of modern science.

I would suggest, in fact, that all the texts that I examine here ultimately offer a similar challenge. All in presenting gender as problematic also question how we define what counts as human in the context of imagined worlds where scientific epistemology is also questioned. Although most evince a feminist politics what they ultimately expose is the way that categories of knowledge both structure and are structured by the artificial divisions through which social worlds are organised. Although I do not claim to offer here an overview of all sf written by women during the century from 1918 to 2022 what I do offer is a selective history which demonstrates the political value of imagining other worlds

from within the margins of this one and which charts a gradual change from the confident extrapolation of *Herland* to the emergence of a new hybrid genre more suited to interrogating the fractured world of the twenty-first century. Along the way, I suggest ways of reading that emphasise the way in which they challenge conventions of both genre and gender. The *time* of sf might be over but its critical function, particularly in the way that it is able to expose the lingering effects of the androcentric mystique and offer alternatives that are not caught in repetitions of tired binaries, is as vital as ever.

Notes

1. In a famous scence from *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1987), set in the late 1980s, Scottie (James Doohan) who is used to simply talking to computers, tries to wake what looks like an early Apple Mac by addressing it verbally. When he gets no response, Dr. McCoy (DeForest Kelley) hands him the mouse which he, again, tries to use as a verbal communication device. The scence is hilarious but is also prophetic. Now, of course, I can ask my computer to, for instance, play my favourite music, without even being in the same room.

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Index

'Your Haploid Heart 4
cyborg 3
Fantasy 3, 6
Feminism 1
Frankenstein 1, 2, 3, 8
Her 8
Herland 3, 4, 7
ideology 4
imperialism 6
No Woman Born 3, 8
posthuman 6
post-truth 4
science 1, 2, 3, 5, 6
science fiction 1, 2, 3, 5, 6
Star Trek. 5
Swastika Night 3, 4, 6, 7
technology 3
The City We Became 6, 8
The Handmaid's Tale 4, 6, 7
The Left Hand of Darkness 4, 8
The Power 4, 5, 6, 7