Science Fiction as a Mirror for Reality
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I’m mad at George Lucas.
I’m mad because he begins each of his Star Wars films with
these ten words: “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...

The world first saw those words (taken, of course, from
the opening often used for fairy tales) in 1977—and and they
changed everything. Up until that point, science fiction
had been making slow but steady progress toward
respectability in the public consciousness.

It’s hard to imagine, in today’s era in which most of the
box-office sensations are science-fiction or fantasy, and
there’s a dedicated science-fiction channel on TV, that we
used to go for years between major SF films...
but that’s the
way it used to be. Prior to the original Star Wars, you had
to go back nine years, to 1968, to find a year with a truly
major SF movie.

That year was remarkable, in fact, because it had two blockbusters: 2001: A Space Odyssey (to this day, Arthur C. Clarke is still the only SF novelist ever nominated for an Oscar; he shared a best-screenplay nomination for that film) and Planet of the Apes.

If you haven’t watched the 1968 Planet of the Apes recently,
or if your only knowledge of it is from the dreadful 2001
remake, you may not realize just how trenchant a commentary it was on its times.

In 1968, America was struggling with race relations, and
with the fear of nuclear war—and those two things are
what Planet of the Apes is about. The ending—perhaps the

best known final sequence in a film since Casablanca—
with Charlton Heston pounding the sand in front of the
ruins of the Statue of Liberty and shouting “You
maniacs—you blew it up!” is a clear anti-nuclear-war
message.

And the very first ape who speaks at length in the film is
a chimpanzee—a member of one of the three ape species
that co-exist uneasily in his world—complaining about
the racial quota system that’s been keeping him down,
even though it’s been officially abolished. (For more on
the film’s social relevance, see the nonfiction book Planet
of the Apes as American Myth: Race and Politics in the Films
and Television Series by Eric Greene, a policy analyst for
the American Civil Liberties Union in Los Angeles
[McFarland, 1996].)

And what was on TV in the 1960s? Well, the evening
news was preoccupied with the struggle to desegregate
the American south, with the war in Vietnam, and with
unrest on university campuses. But once the news was
over, what did we find for the rest of the evening? TV
shows like Green Acres, Get Smart, and Gilligan’s Island—
programs with nothing at all to say about real life.

I mean, for Pete’s sake, Get Smart was set in Washington,
D.C., where all the protests about Vietnam were directed,
and yet it never even mentioned them. In fact, the only
social comment in any of those shows was a throwaway
bit on Gilligan’s Island. The stranded boat, the S.S. Minnow,
was named for Newton Minow, who, on May 9, 1961,
had famously raked the National Association of
Broadcasters over the coals for having turned television
into a “vast wasteland.” Gilligan’s Island creator Sherwood
Schwartz felt that Minow’s highbrow approach would
ruin television, and so gave him the ultimate in empty TV.

But there was one prime-time show that dealt with the issues of the day—albeit with disguises, with metaphor,
at a distance, by parable. The original Star Trek was clearly
talking about Vietnam, about race relations, about
prejudice, about overpopulation. I’ll never forget the first
time I saw Batman’s Riddler himself, Frank Gorshin, made
up as half-black and half-white, locked in a war of hate
with another man whose colour scheme was reversed.
And the episode A Private Little War was a direct mirroring
of the Vietnam war, with Captain Kirk’s Federation
standing in for the Americans and the Klingons playing
the role of the Russians.
I was a kid when Star Trek debuted in 1966, but even then I could see that it was tackling the same issues being talked about on the evening news. And, as I started reading SF books in the 1970s, I discovered that the literature had always been that way, right back to its roots.

There used to be a lot of debate about what the first science-fiction book was—the term was coined in 1926, but SF stories clearly predate the moniker. Now, though, most people within the field have come around to agreeing with British author and critic Brian Aldiss, who argues that the first work of SF—as opposed to fantasy or any other genre—was Frankenstein by Mary Shelley, first published in 1818. It was the first novel in which the plot hinged on a scientific notion: Dr. Frankenstein observes the decay and corruption that occurs after death and recognizes that these are clearly chemical processes that, if he studied them minutely, he might be able to reverse, creating life from dead matter, thereby doing what nature or God had done.

Frankenstein is widely taught at universities to this day—and in two types of courses. Naturally, it’s often the first book in a science-fiction course, but it’s also widely taught in women’s studies or feminist studies—because it’s a direct social comment on new reproductive technologies and the role of women. In Mary Shelley’s day, members of her sex were disenfranchised and marginalized. They had no power—except the creation of life. And if you take that from women, and give it to men, said Shelley, it will be a disaster, because men lack the empathy and compassion required to properly nurture life. In the novel, everything goes wrong when Victor—very deliberately not Victoria—Frankenstein rejects his creation, having been interested only in the scientific puzzle he was trying to solve.

If Mary Shelley is science fiction’s grandmother, its fathers are H.G. Wells and Jules Verne—guys you might have thought would have been fast friends. But in fact, Jules Verne didn’t much care for that snot-nosed Brit, H. G. Wells.

Verne, you see, was only interested in scientific rigor. Parts of 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea read like an oceanography textbook, and Captain Nemo’s Nautilus was a fully worked-out submarine decades before such things were actually built.

But as Verne liked to sneer, with Gallic disdain, “Wells invents things!” meaning he made them up out of whole cloth. Martian invaders! Time machines! How could any self-respecting futurist pollute his work with such nonsense?

But now the future is here, and it’s Wells, not Verne, who is still widely read and taught. Why? Because although Verne was an ÜbergEEK in his day, nothing is less interesting than old technology; Wired magazine’s three-part barometer of “wired,” “tired,” and “expired” gives the new-and-exciting a half-life of about six months.

But while Verne was playing with his slide rule, Wells was talking about issues. True, they were the issues of his time—and you might think that would make his stories even more irrelevant to today’s readers than Verne’s 19th-century tales of steam-driven machines.

Verne’s complaints, Wells’s War of the Worlds really has nothing to do with Martians invading Earth. Rather, it was Wells’s attempt, using the unique tools of science fiction, to get his countrymen to see what it’s like to have one’s culture crushed underfoot (“Underfoot” is the title of one of the book’s chapters) by an uncaring, expansionist, technologically advanced foreign power. He’d hoped his compatriots would realize the cruelty of what Britain was doing in India and other places. Indeed, Wells makes a parody of Great Britain’s macho posturing by portraying his Martian war machines as giant, strutting walkers with a phallic third leg leading the way.

And Wells’s The Time Machine isn’t really about a trip to the year 802,701 A.D. Rather, it’s a pointed attack on the British class system, with the cattle-like Eloi standing in for the feckless leisure class, and the subterranean Morlocks representing the working class, denied even the simple joy of being out in the sun.

Wells’s message, by the way, wasn’t just that this system is bad for the working class, but also that it’s bad for the leisure class, leaving them so weak of mind, spirit, and body that the Morlocks end up actually using them as food animals, coming up through openings from the sewers each night to pick up a bucket of KFE—Kentucky Fried Eloi.

And although Verne probably said plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose with a more convincing accent than Wells,
it is old H.G.'s literary legacy that has benefited from that truism. A huge, uncaring power marching in, deposing the local government, and crushing everything in sight? The widening gap between the world's haves and have-nots? Issues that are as relevant today as they were over a century ago, more's the pity.

And that brings me back to George Lucas and his disclaimer that science-fiction films are escapism, set “a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away.” By saying that, he’s telling you that there’s no social commentary to be found in science fiction, no relevance, no reflection of the times—and audiences accepted that, turning off their critical faculties when encountering his SF, and leaving them off ever since.

You want proof? *Star Wars* spoon-feeds us its morality. Even the characters know which of them are the good guys and which are the bad guys; the bad guys have chosen to align themselves with the Dark Side of the Force. And because we know who is supposedly good, and because this is all just a fairy tale, we don’t ever give the morality of what these heroes are doing a second thought.

But consider what Luke Skywalker actually does. When we first encounter him and his uncle, they’re buying thinking, feeling, sentient beings to work on their plantation. How do we know that R2-D2 and C-3PO are slaves? We see the jaws—the slave dealers—welding restraining bolts onto them; this doesn’t happen in the background—it’s right there in the foreground, and the bolts are identified as such in dialog. In other words, the newly purchased slaves are being handed over in manacles, because, if left to their own free will, they’d run away, as any slaves would. Far from a paragon of virtue, Luke Skywalker is a slave; it’s no coincidence that C-3PO has to call him “master” throughout the film.

Ah, but Luke is young! The real symbol of ultimate good in *Star Wars* surely isn’t this misguided farm boy, but rather his mentor, the great Jedi knight Obi-Wan Kenobi, played by Alec Guinness.

When Obi-Wan enters the Mos Eisley cantina—that seedy bar where aliens play musical instruments while shady characters cut deals—the bartender eyes the two droids accompanying Kenobi and snarls, “We don’t serve their kind in here.”

And what does the virtuous Obi-Wan say in reply? Does he pound his fist on a table and declare, “If their money is no good in here, my money is no good in here!” Does he go off to report the barkeep to the authorities, because it’s illegal to discriminate? No. He turns to his two companions—being rejected solely because their skin is metal—and says, “You better wait outside.”

This was 1977, remember. Just a decade and a half before, blacks in the U.S. were routinely hearing “we don’t serve their kind in here” from white bartenders; film audiences should have been as stung in 1977 to hear this passing for an acceptable policy as audiences today are when Ingrid Bergman refers to Sam, a black man, as a “boy” in *Casablanca*.

But thanks to George Lucas’s opening disclaimer, nobody paid any attention to the flagrant racism. The heroes of *Star Wars* are cowards and evil ... but at the end of the film, they all get medals and a standing ovation (yes, Lucas actually was so insecure a director back then as to film his heroes being applauded, in case the real audience failed to do so). And moviegoers did cheer as Han Solo (established as a drug-runner and a cold-blooded killer in the film), the slave owner Luke, and even the inarticulate walking carpet, Chewbacca, get gold medals. But who is literally on the sidelines, getting no applause, no reward? The slaves, R2-D2 and C-3PO. And nobody in the movie, and nobody in the theatre, complained.

Why not? Because science fiction, George Lucas had told us, has nothing to do with the real world. We’d gone from *Planet of the Apes*, which was all about race relations—dealing with the conflicts between three distinct kinds of simians, standing in, literally behind masks, for different human races—to ignoring, nay, cheering, overt racism as acceptable. George Lucas’s little disclaimer shunted aside all the good work that Mary Shelley had done with *Frankenstein*, that H.G. Wells had done with *War of the Worlds*, that Gene Roddenberry had done with *Star Trek*, that screenwriters Rod Serling and the once-blacklisted Michael Wilson had done with *Planet of the Apes*. (With the exception of a handful of episodes, all later *Star Trek*, starting in 1987 with *The Next Generation*, eschewed social
comment in favour of soap opera and costume drama.)

Star Wars did, in a way, have a salutary effect on science-fiction literature. George Lucas’s Industrial Light and Magic special-effects shop can blow up a planet better than I or my colleagues can describe it in words, and better than you or other readers can imagine it. And, indeed, we book writers were happy to cede the territory of eye candy to Hollywood (the shift had begun even earlier; actually, with the “New Wave” an initially British movement in the 1960s, which emphasized inner space over outer space; I don’t think it’s a coincidence that the New Wave started as soon as movie and TV special effects began routinely being in colour). We were content to let technicians have fun with visual effects; that gave us even more room to concentrate on social comment in our books.

And comment we do. A reporter in Richmond, Virginia, recently said to me: “Are there any social issues that you think science-fiction writers should leave alone?”

I replied that he had it exactly backwards! There are no social issues SF writers should not be willing to tackle. In my own books, I’ve dealt with abortion, capital punishment, racism, sexism, affirmative action, gay rights, recovered memories of childhood abuse, corruption within the Catholic church, the politics of war, personal freedom vs. societal security, 9/11, creation vs. evolution, and more.

And there’s a very good reason we SF writers choose to address such things through science fiction. If I told you beforehand that I was the author of a book on the abortion issue (which is one of the things my Nebula Award-winning The Terminal Experiment deals with), your first question would be, “Are you pro-choice, or pro-life?”

In other words, you’d want to know up front if the book reaffirmed what you already believed, or if it challenged it—and you’d only want to read it if the former was true. For that’s what we mostly turn to books for: not to learn, but to affirm that we were right all along. People are smug and righteous about their beliefs, and they like nothing better than to read a book that reiterates what they already believe.

But easy labels do a disservice: they ensure that authors are only preaching to the converted. If you go into a bookstore, and tell the clerk that your politics are liberal, he can offer you the perfect book: Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them: A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right by Al Franken. You’ll read it, laugh, and feel smugly vindicated.

And if your politics are conservative, the clerk can hand you How to Talk to a Liberal (If You Must): The World According to Ann Coulter—and you’ll come back for more copies of it to give as gifts because she says with panache all the things you’ve been trying to articulate for years.

More recently, such books as Christopher Hitchens’s God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything, read almost exclusively by those who are already atheists, and Scott Hahn’s Reasons to Believe: How to Understand, Explain, and Defend the Catholic Faith, a favourite of the devout, generate many self-satisfied smirks but change precious few minds.

Now, yes, there is a branch of science fiction that is as transparent in its goals as these nonfiction books. Much military SF caters to a very specific right-wing might-makes-right mindset that says our culture should go out and set everyone else in the universe straight. I set that type of book apart from the kind of SF I’m talking about here because there’s no disguise, no metaphor: these are just war stories with bigger and badder guns than the ones you can buy right now.

But when you pick up an ambitious science-fiction book, you have no initial idea what issues are hiding behind masks in its pages. Take my own most-recent book, Rollback: among other things, it’s about unequal access to health care, and how we should apportion expensive medical resources.

When Tommy Douglas and the CCF created socialized medicine in Canada, they had no idea that you would soon be able to pour almost unlimited amounts of money into measurably improving the health or extending the lifespan of an individual. But now that we can, should there be caps on what our provincial health plans offer? And should it simply be the rich who get to live the longest, by going to private clinics? In science fiction, you won’t even know you’re reading about a hot-button topic until you’re
well into the book—and hopefully by that point too
cought up in the story to bail out.

Note that my colleagues and I aren’t trying to make you
think what we think. We don’t hide the real topic from
you to sneak up and hit you over the head with our own
views; rather, we do it to let the topic sneak up on you, the
reader, getting past facile labels. When something’s reduced
to a two- or three-word slogan—“pro-life,” “pro-choice,”
“support our troops,” “save the whales”—you don’t really
give it any thought. But again, SF, with metaphor and disguise,
at a distance, through parable, doesn’t just get you back
to the core issues of today, but also gets you past the
easy labels, inviting you to think in depth.

And precious few other places in our lives welcome that.
Oh, in high school or at university, you might have stayed
up to 3:00 a.m. arguing about the moral crisis or war du
jour. But after you get out into the real world, you’re
exhorted to avoid discussions of politics, sex, and religion.
The sure road to a peaceful evening out, or a smooth
dclimb up the corporate ladder, we’re told, is to steer clear
of thorny topics.

But, like Brer Rabbit, born and bred in the briar patch, SF
readers enjoy being thrown in with the thorns. We
welcome the chance to engage with the issues, to use our
minds, to argue and debate—with an author, and with
ourselves— as we look at the here and now through
science fiction’s very special lens. And nothing could be
further from the mindless escapism of a long time ago, in
a galaxy far, far away.

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Robert J. Sawyer is one of only
seven writers in history—and
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