

## Reflecting on Science Fiction

*For the first issue of MOSF Journal of Science Fiction, our editorial team reached out to science fiction scholars around the world and invited them to tell us how science fiction has changed how they perceive the world. Here's what some of them said.*

"Science fiction is the genre in which I feel most at home, despite its association with the alien, futuristic, and off-world. Perhaps it's because science fiction was an integral part of my childhood, as present as religion was absent. My parents were self-described secular humanists who never spoke about God, although they frequently made reference to "grokking," a term that, even at an early age, I understood to mean a kind of spiritual communion (I learned of its Heinleinian derivation only after raiding my parent's bookshelf as a teenager). We lived in a small New York City apartment whose cramped quarters were expanded by big ideas, some of them about space and time, topics that fascinated my father. Copies of *Astronomy Magazine* and *Sky & Telescope* were strewn around our living room. During the summer, a large telescope was permanently positioned out our bathroom window. *Star Trek* was one of our few family rituals.

The first film I remember being taken to see was *2001: A Space Odyssey* at Hayden Planetarium. I was six years old, far too young to understand the narrative, but I still experienced the film as a kind of visual symphony. On my second viewing in college, I wept inconsolably during the final scenes with the Star Child and, when friends asked why, I was only able to express a feeling of primal longing. The longing was, in retrospect, for home, although not the one I had left behind despite my early encounter with the film. Rather, it was for the home I had yet to discover. The teleology and sense of inevitability that the film conveys in such poetic and monolithic terms filled me with a desire for meaning and purpose, both of which eluded me at that age. The power of science fiction has, for me, always been in part about the curiosity and even longing that it inspires in relation to the uncharted. By rendering the familiar strange and the strange familiar, science fiction fosters a psychological, spiritual, and intellectual reorientation that makes it not only a form of entertainment, but also a mode of critical inquiry.

A good deal of my current work as a digital media maker and scholar is focused on questions around media, technology, and the body—that is, the ways in which consciousness, perception, identity, and desire are mediated by, projected onto, and expressed through visual and communications technologies. I have found not only science fiction, but also what Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. calls *science-fictionality*, "a mode of response that frames and tests experiences as if they were aspects of a work of science fiction,"<sup>1</sup> indispensable for both thinking through and helping my students to engage with these questions. Science fiction films, from *Metropolis* to *The Matrix*, have provided some of the most enduring critiques of the socio- and psycho-physiological effects of visual media technologies, from the cinema to the internet. It is the unique propensities of science fiction for self-reflexivity, in addition to its ability to reorient, that inspire me to return to it again and again."

—Allison de Fren, Ph.D.

2010 winner of the Science Fiction Research Association's Pioneer Award

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<sup>1</sup> Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

“As a long-time science fiction reader, I no longer have much interest in novels of psychological realism. Realist novels tend to treat the world as a background to the foreground of individual character development and conflict. The world of such novels is a given and, therefore, requires very little attention except insofar as it impacts the characters who are central to its particular plots. In science fiction, the world itself is foregrounded and its characters are embedded in that world—whether that world is a future Earth, some other planet, or the whole of the universe. Psychological realism magnifies the specifics of the individual psyche, while science fiction is the genre of the zoom-out.

My favourite example of this comes at the end of H.G. Wells’s short story, “The Star” (1897), which tells of the catastrophic impact on the Earth of a passing planetary body. In the final paragraph of his story, Wells shifts the perspective from human beings to that of astronomers on Mars. Viewed through their telescopes, the Earth seems barely touched, “which,” as the narrator points out, “only shows how small the vastest of human catastrophes may seem, at a distance of a few million miles” (Wells, 1897).

Reading science fiction can also affect how one thinks about the relationships among past, present, and future. As has often been noted, science fiction can historicize the present, inviting us to view it as the past of some future time and, therefore, as having some direct responsibility for creating that future. Once again, Wells has given us a perfect example in *The Time Machine* (1895), in which the Time Traveller contemplates his own Victorian moment from the perspective of the radically transformed far-future world of 802,701. The implication in Wells’s novella, of course, is that the Victorian present is more or less directly responsible for the devolution of humanity into the grotesque remnants that are the Eloi and the Morlocks. Also implicit in this is the idea that the future is not a single fixed and determined point toward which we are inevitably drawn, but something contingent and undetermined, capable of being shaped in many different directions. Everything in the world, both past and future, shares in this contingency, and this leaves us free to dream of worlds and futures that could be otherwise. Ultimately, science fiction has politicized my view of the world.”

—Veronica Hollinger, Ph.D.  
Co-editor of *Science Fiction Studies*