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PREVIEW

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Paradigms Out of Joint:
Feminist Science Fiction and Cultural Logic

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
English
by
Cynthia Anne Morrill
June, 1997

Dissertation Committee:
Sue-Ellen Case, Chairperson
George E. Haggerty
Marguerite R. Waller

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PREVIEW

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1997

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Paradigms Out of Joint: Feminist Science Fiction and Cultural Logic

by

Cynthia Anne Morrill

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English

University of California, Riverside, June, 1997

Professor Sue-Ellen Case, Chairperson

This dissertation examines science fiction's capacity to extrapolate alternative cultural logics and its potential to narrativize fictions of social change. To constitute science fiction as a particular literary practice operating through subversions of semiotic and cultural paradigms, and of great significance to feminist thought, I draw the understanding of science fiction's protocols of reading and writing specified in the semiotic work of science fiction critics Samuel R. Delany and Teresa de Lauretis, together with selected ideas and terms from the work of the popular science fiction writer-critics of the 1940s and 1950s, particularly James Blish's ideas about the science fiction as the literature of "conceptual breakthroughs" and "paradigm shifts," to produce a functional description of science fiction as a type of paraliterature interested in performing "paradigm" violations at the level of the sentence and at the level of the text's cultural logic. Thomas Kuhn's comments regarding the scientific paradigm, and the procedures of geographical orientation and projection, are employed to clarify how science fiction texts serve to represent alternative cultural logics by putting paradigms out of joint. Donna Haraway's notion of

situated knowledge is called upon to provide means for viewing science fiction not as an illustration of the real under different terms but rather as commentary upon discourse. Haraway's situated knowledge in other words is key to understanding science fiction not as a type of "faux realism" but rather as a discursive strategy for stripping away the "real" through a reliteralization of language. Through an extended discussion of Jack Arnold's science fiction films Creature from the Black Lagoon and Revenge of the Creature I provide a description of dominant Western cultural logic as a discursive construct. Octavia E. Butler's Xenogenesis Trilogy, Samuel R. Delany's Triton and Joanna Russ's The Female Man are examined as feminist science fiction interventions opposing that logic. Butler's, Delany's and Russ's texts produce science fiction that puts paradigms out of joint by unseating transparent mimetic strategies, representations of objectivity and stable models of social order giving feminist and others opportunities to explore possibilities for change.

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Chapter One

Introducing Time Out of Joint: Cultural Logic in Science Fiction

When did the dull, plodding world suddenly light up?
When did it fill with a vast, fast, cast of youth, all
brilliantly playing roles only dreamed of previously in
gaudy sf magazines? . . . What called them into being?
When did they shimmer into life? In the sixties (Brian
Aldiss Trillion Year Spree 285).

Amidst the more conspicuous social turbulence during the second-half of the 1960s, the rise of the women's and the ecological movements, the Lesbian and Gay civil rights uprising at New York's Stonewall Inn, student demonstrations against myriad forms of injustice, anti-Viet Nam war protests, and the civil rights struggle for people of color, unusual activity also took place within the far less conspicuous paraliterary field commonly referred to as science fiction.¹ Much like United States culture at large, late 1960s American and British science fiction or "sf" issued numerous challenges to its

¹My designation of science fiction as a form of paraliterature is adopted after the work of Samuel R. Delany and Darko Suvin. Delany uses the term to celebrate science fiction as distinct from what he ironically designates mundane fiction (high literature, realist fiction); Suvin, unfortunately, uses the term pejoratively. In his seminal work on Metamorphoses of Science Fiction, Suvin writes, "I cannot even begin here to discuss the reasons for studying paraliterature -- the popular, 'low,' or plebeian literary production of various times, particularly since the Industrial Revolution"(vii). Regardless of one's critical attitude towards the subject matter, the term paraliterature efficiently reveals science fiction's complex relationship to canonical literature. It furthermore marks science fiction's lateral relationship to other types of commercial fiction, such as Westerns, police procedurals, and suspense novels.

traditional forms, topics and heroes.² A specialty pulp-magazine industry that had begun in the 1920s, expanded its publishing base in the late 1950s and early 1960s to include original hardback and paperback novels and a vast array of original and reprint short story anthologies. It also began to turn from children's markets to adult's market³ The exemplary protagonist of science fiction was transformed as science fiction writers latched onto "the hip, modern man of the sixties, now an expert in tongues and no longer the competent engineer of earlier science fiction" (Aldiss Trillion 296). Established authors such as Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clark and Robert A. Heinlein were joined by a new generation of writers including J. G. Ballard, Samuel R. Delany and Thomas M. Disch notable for their writerly innovations and inspiring a type of science fiction some called "New

²As a designation for science fiction, the letters sf carry a good deal of highly contested critical baggage. Gary K. Wolfe notes in his Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy that while science fiction circles may favor sf over other such terms as "sci-fi," by no means is the abbreviation sf without controversy (117). Sometimes used to specify what critics have termed "speculative fiction" or "structural Fabulation," this project employs the letters sf to indicate an abbreviation for science fiction in its broadest description as a twentieth century paraliterature.

³ As Samuel R. Delany recently observed, identifying science fiction's originary text is an impossible task. Over the past few decades, however, numerous critics have tried. Brian Aldiss's arguments in favor of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein are perhaps the most well known (Trillion). What can be identified is the beginnings of science fiction as a contemporary cultural phenomenon. Emerging out of the science fiction pulp magazines of the 1920s, science fiction fandom began with magazine sponsored clubs, such as the Science Fiction League in 1934.

Wave.”⁴ By the close of the decade, the “New Wave” seemed to be over even if its experimental literary style continued to appear in both American and British science fiction markets. On the other hand, the end of the decade also saw the sharp rise of feminist influence upon the field as a new generation of women writers transformed the science fiction hero once more. Aldiss’s “hip modern man” was now, sometimes, a woman. New explanations for the social positioning of women relative to men and the politics of women’s liberation became topics for science fiction extrapolation. Gender and sexuality were no longer categories to be taken for granted.

This project concerns itself with selected science fiction texts published between 1969 and 1989 and their invention of feminist, anti-racist and anti-homophobic cultural logics. Still despite these historical brackets, my interest is neither in writing a limited history of science fiction nor in establishing the parameters for a genre of feminist

⁴Whether science fiction’s “New Wave” was an actual literary movement or more a “state of mind” is one of the major controversies in scholarship on this period. In his entry in the Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, Peter Nichols finds that,

In was common during the 1970s and 1980s, especially for those (like Disch) who resisted stereotyping, to dismiss the importance of the New Wave, or even to deny it existed. From the perspective of the 1990s, however, it seems fair to say that the New Wave was real and liberating . . . The 1960s were indeed a maturing period for genre sf; if we see the 1960s as sf’s puberty, then we also have an explanation for why some of it, at the time, was so irritating (especially in its tone of voice): most adolescents are. One reason why the perspective of the 1990s is useful is that we have, meanwhile, been able to observe yet another New Wave in action: cyberpunk” (“New Wave” 867, emphasis his).

science fiction. Accordingly, this project does not entirely follow in the tradition of earlier popular science fiction critics such as Damon Knight, William Atheling, Jr. (James Blish), and Judith Merrill, or later academic science fiction critics such as Carl D. Malmgren, Thomas D. Clareson, Darko Suvin, and Gary K. Wolfe. This project breaks with what has been in large part a critical method dominated by traditional Aristotelian interests in procedures of division and classification.

Much like the critics of other paraliteratures, science fiction critics have often been preoccupied with finding means to establish science fiction as a specific genre.⁵ While popular critics have frequently sought to defend science fiction from those who dismiss it as hopelessly adolescent, academic critics have tended to pursue a course of study that is primarily regulative.⁶ To be fair, beyond the more obvious goals of defense, regulation, and prescription, science fiction critics have also worked to account for such things as modern science fiction's relationship to the rise of pulp media in the early twentieth century, advances in contemporary science, science fiction's unusually active fandom, and the intertextuality between science fiction and other paraliteratures such as the western. Given the high degree of

⁵In addition to defining science fiction in opposition to other forms of paraliterature and literature, critics have also sought to establish various sub-genres within the greater field of science fiction, for example, hard science fiction, soft science fiction, science fantasy, cyberpunk and so forth. See, for example, Stableford.

⁶See, for example, Suvin.

rigor that is characteristic of this critical work, these discussions of science fiction have not lacked in sophistication or merit. Yet due to their preoccupation with questions of identification and description other questions have remained unasked. More troublesomely, as a result of myriad internal changes within the field of science fiction, especially the increasing presence of women authors since the 1970s, the desire to find a core definition of science fiction loyal to all of its varied examples has increasingly met with critical strife and stall. Notwithstanding continuing attempts by certain critics, as Hillegas notes, the attempt to synthesize a genre definition from a catalog of motifs common to science fiction texts, or to establish through "content analysis" a sense of "the values and attitudes for which popular literature is vehicle" seems less and less viable (272). With this in mind, in the place of defining science fiction as a coherent genre, this project will seek an alternative standpoint.

After the work of author and critic Samuel R. Delany and others, this project will identify science fiction through a functional description of its capacity to present alternative cultural logics, only one of many possible methods of identification. Science fiction is further understood as a paraliterature that shows unusual potential for political analysis. To that end, chapter two provides, in addition to a more closely described review of science fiction criticism, a more detailed argument explaining the significance of science fiction as a paraliterature particularly useful for writing what Teresa de Lauretis describes as "new maps of social reality" ("Signs" 169). From this

perspective science fiction may be seen as a form of representation holding great promise for feminism, a political theory and practice that has been dedicated to the “mapping” of an anti-hegemonic political order. At stake in this project is understanding the extent to which science fiction serves to constitute feminist thought and feminism functions as a type of science fiction.

Through an analysis of film director Jack Arnold’s celebrated 1950s Creature films, chapter three analyses the operations of dominant Western cultural logic as technologies of sex, gender and race. The first set in a primeval Amazonian rain forest; the second set in segregated southern Florida; Creature from the Black Lagoon and Revenge of the Creature depict a monster who terrorizes white woman and threatens white male hegemonic authority. Together, the two films provide unexpected insight into Western or Eurocentric notions of gender, sexuality, and race through their presentation of racist and sexist thought. Short of arguing that Creature or Revenge are of specific interest to feminist science fiction, chapter three considers the political stakes for feminist science fiction by treating the two films as primers upon formations of racism and sexism in Western culture.

The subsequent chapters of this project offer textual readings of selected feminist science fiction novels from the 1970s and 1980s. Specifically, chapters four, five and six address key works by Joanna Russ, Samuel R. Delany and Octavia E. Butler, respectively. Against backdrops of post-atomic Amazonian rain forests, interstellar vessels, Saturn’s moons, and alternative universes, by means of travels across

space-time continuums, experiments in exobiology, and innovations in social justice, each of the selected texts weave accounts for, and or solutions to, the predominance of masculine privilege and thought. Butler's Xenogenesis Trilogy: Dawn, Adulthood Rites, and Imago, Delany's Triton, and Russ's The Female Man not only present insightful examinations of the construction and function of gender, sexuality and race, but also examinations of science fiction itself. Through their interventions and revisions of well-known science fiction sub-genres, the alternative worlds story, the future society and the post-apocalypse adventure, The Female Man, Triton and the Xenogenesis Trilogy, respectively, bring feminist, anti-racist and anti-homophobic politics to bear upon science fiction's paraliterary forms.

Accordingly, chapters four, five and six not only consider representations of gender, sexuality and race, but also the relationship of each text to the paraliterary field of science fiction. To that end, these chapters assess the critical reception of the novels under discussion and their intertextual relationship between other works in each authors oeuvre.

The Female Man is addressed as a novel that poses more questions than it answers. Unlike the typical feminist utopia, Joanna Russ's most celebrated novel is deeply concerned with popular science fiction texts. Chapter four explores The Female Man's intriguing relationship to science fiction by John Wyndham and Cordwainer Smith and its less obvious debt to work by Robert A. Heinlein. The Female Man is presented as a complex analysis of masculinist

presumption and a thoughtful challenge to logical underpinnings of Western humanism. In the end, The Female Man offers no solutions. Regardless of who holds the power, the binary power relations that are at the foundation of Western cultural logic are shown to produce only negative results. Her pessimistic message reminds us that women must do more than achieve power equal to men; women must transform the very ways in which power can be held. Remarkable in its insight into the operations of sexism, Russ leaves the extrapolation of non-hegemonic cultural logic to her successors.

Written in part as a response to The Female Man, Samuel R. Delany's Triton extrapolates heterotopia in the guise of a new kind of hero, the city of Tethys. Housed under a sensory shield on one of Saturn's lifeless moons, Delany's wondrous society offers a counterpoint to Western cultural logic. Tethys is heterotopia because it rejects the ways of knowing common to Western liberal humanist thought. The citizens of Tethys have no knowledge of a self known through opposition to a debased Other; rather, they see themselves through likeness and relationship to others. For the citizens of Tethys, the definition of the self is found through the recognition of one's type. Paradoxically, while the city's political structure leans towards anarchy, its citizenry finds tremendous benefit through recognizing oneself in the actions of others.

Where Delany pursues an epistemological solution to the end-game of The Female Man, Octavia E. Butler's Xenogenesis Trilogy offers a narrative of change through the interventions of a second party

and the demand for a new relationship between people and their environment. Although not written in direct response to Russ's famous book, Butler's trilogy follows in the tradition of feminist science fiction. Dawn, Adulthood Rites and Imago chronicle the adventures of a small group of human survivors. Discovered while slowly dying in the aftermath of a nuclear war, they are rescued and kept in suspended animation by an alien species known as the Oankali. Two centuries later, following the Oankali's restoration of Earth, they are transported back to a tropical jungle and expected to begin a new society by learning to fend for themselves by living off the land, but also to engage in a xenogenesis with the Oankali. There's is to be the last generation of human beings; the future will be the province of a new, hybrid species, part Human and part Oankali. Butler's series suggests that in addition to a reordering of Western cultural logic there must also be a reconfiguration of people's relationship to the Earth itself. Whereas Delany develops an alternative cultural logic that is in part based upon the alienation of human beings from their environment (heterotopia exists on a moon incapable of supporting human life), Butler argues for complete interdependence between people and their environment. The Xenogenesis Trilogy uses the controversial theory of sociobiology to develop its highly eccentric and startlingly original eco-feminist response to racism and sexism.

To a degree, the feminist theory of these novels, particularly Russ's and Delany's may appear to be somewhat dated, if not all together archaic. For at closing of the final decade of the twentieth

century feminist critics appear to be more engaged in interrogating the rhetoric of the second wave of feminism than in looking forward to what feminist theory might have to offer on the eve of the millennium. On the one hand, recent work examining the conflicts between feminists has produced a useful alternative to a model of feminism that has sometimes mimicked the universalizing tendencies typical of Western thought. On the other, these examinations have also, sometimes, produced useless separatism and paralyzing debate. Regardless, it would seem that in 1997 the verdict is in for so-called "seventies feminism."

Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller make this crisis within feminist thought the subject of their edited volume Conflicts in Feminism.⁷ In their introduction, the editors remark with some regret, "A decade ago, we thought of ourselves as part of--even in the vanguard of--a movement that then seemed capable of changing the world," however, today we find that "the 'dream of a common language' [has given] way to the realities of fractured discourses" (1). Far from wishing to resolve the differences in theoretical methods and critical practices that now separate various aspects of feminism thought (for example, psychoanalytic and materialist feminism) or the conflicts between feminist theory and other theoretical disciplines (feminist

⁷Hirsch and Keller are not alone in their concern. Sneja Gunew's edited volume Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Conflict covers similar material. However, whereas Hirsch and Keller's volume avoids proposing any particular remedies, Gunew's volume argues for strong international involvement in feminist thought.

theory and deconstruction), the editors hope instead that there “will emerge new models for a discourse of difference--models that would preserve the dynamic possibilities but defuse the explosive potential of enduring agreements” (5). Hirsch and Keller want to appease anti-seventies feminist critics in order to forge a future for a new and improved feminism.

Others, however, find that the insights of feminist thought from the seventies no longer apply. A new field of gender studies has superseded the politics of women’s liberation and a new “post feminist” order has begun. Lest anyone takes easy comfort in this turn in feminist theory, Tania Modleski delivers a scathing “Postmortem on Postfeminism” to introduce her ominously titled book, Feminism Without Women. Modleski’s interest is in detailing and analyzing “texts that, in proclaiming and assuming the advent of post feminism, are actually engaged in negating the critiques and undermining the goals of feminism--in effect delivering us into a post feminist world” (3). To that end, Modleski interrogates a range of films, political controversies, and subcultural practices relevant to feminism and revealing of androcentric anxieties about women in relationship to feminism itself. Modleski’s interest is in the present state of feminism as it comes under fire for myopia in its formulations and practices, as well as seeming irrelevance to some other political projects (e.g., anti-homophobia and anti-racism work). To be sure, a critique of a practice that has often times marginalized, if not all together ignored questions regarding class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality in favor of concentrating

upon the social construction and oppression of heterosexual white women is imperative. Yet it would seem imprudent to jettison all the theoretical suppositions and political practices of feminism's second wave.

While Modleski's interest is in examining current debates in feminist theory against the backdrop of late 1980s cultural production, my interest is in reexamining some almost forgotten texts from the middle seventies. Indeed, a retrospective look at key 1970s science fiction texts such as Delany's Triton and Russ's The Female Man indicates that the verdict on seventies feminism may have been found too soon. Obviously, it would be presumptuous to advocate these texts as the final answer to "the question of the nature and genesis of women's oppression and social subordination" (157), as it was so famously posed in Gayle Rubin's The Traffic in Women. Yet the outright dismissal of all feminist thought from the 1970s would seem equally reckless and premature. Furthermore, given that the bulk of the critical thinking on these texts has been devoted to utopian studies, serious focus upon their development and deployment of feminist thought has remained under thought or ignored all together. Remarkably, despite authors Delany and Russ's status as significant writers in science fiction, critical discussions of The Female Man and Triton have tended also to exclude these novels from consideration as science fiction.

Published in the decade after the above mentioned works by Delany and Russ, Butler's Xenogenesis Trilogy develops from a similar

feminist critical tradition. As I have already indicated, the series offers significant insight into the feminist account of the subordination of women and people of color. Like Russ and Delany, Butler articulates many of the insights brought about by “seventies feminism.” The Xenogenesis Trilogy builds upon feminist thought from the seventies adding the environmental concerns of 1980s eco-feminism without subtracting from a rigorous critique of sexism and racism as tools of a white androcentric social order.

To consider these works as representative of feminist science fiction, however, it is necessary to provide first some account of feminist science fiction’s development. To that end, I must return to those pivotal final years of the 1960s. At the close of the decade two publications of central importance to feminist science fiction texts appeared on the shelves of booksellers. In 1968, Joanna Russ published the largest installment of her adventures of Alyx, Picnic on Paradise; one year later, Ursula K. LeGuin published her Nebula and Hugo-award winning novel, The Left Hand of Darkness.

Obviously it would be impossible to specify Russ’s and LeGuin’s novels as the first examples of feminist science fiction, earlier works by authors such as C.L. Moore and Leigh Brackett could in retrospect be identified as feminist or proto-feminist works. Regardless, my interest in these texts is not in establishing feminist science fiction’s beginnings. Rather, what makes LeGuin’s and Russ’s texts of interest to this discussion is their demonstration of a debt to the insights of the widespread cultural critique that was contemporary to their writing.

More specifically, both works not only respond from the insights of feminism, they also add to its body of knowledge. The two may be seen as important precursors to feminist science fiction of the middle-to-late seventies, eighties and nineties.

Published in the same year as the first lunar landing, The Left Hand of Darkness was instantly hailed a classic. For a field notoriously disinterested in the serious consideration of the cultural operations of gender and sexuality, and a type of paraliterature typically dismissed as hopelessly adolescent and ponderously masculine, LeGuin's novel signaled both feminist innovations in narrative extrapolation and an expansion of science fiction's readership. Not surprisingly, LeGuin's adventure novel about diplomatic emissary Genly Ai's dealing with the ambisexual people of Gethen has received a fair amount of critical attention by feminists and others. Indeed, feminist assessments of the merits and shortcomings of the Nebula and Hugo award winning novel, including LeGuin's own "Is Gender Necessary," have figured prominently among the numerous discussions of the work. While on the one hand often despairing over Left Hand's use of masculine pronouns instead of non-gender specific pronouns, seeming homophobia, and inattention to reproductive labor, feminist critics have also celebrated The Left Hand of Darkness's ingenious extrapolation of a non-heterosexual reproductive economy. Furthermore, the novel's clever revisioning of a "first contact" story, and its mythic portrayal of Genly Ai's extraordinary journey across Gethen's landscapes of snow and ice, positions The Left Hand of