DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 136 302 CS 203 296

AUTHOR	Elkins, Charles
TITLE	The Social Functions of Science Fiction: Some Notes on Methodology.
PUB DATE	76
NOTE	16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Modern Language Association, 1976
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Futures (of Society); Literary Analysis; Middle Class Values; Political Attitudes; *Science Fiction; *Social Influences; *Social Structure; *Social Values; Theories

ABSTRACT

The major function of science fiction writers is to describe the nature of and to find resolutions for the role conflicts which confront their social group as it moves into the future. Most science fiction performs what is best described as a "magical" function. The conscious exploration of the meaning of various social roles is seldom attempted; neither is there any real critical examination of the means-ends relationship in characters' actions. Expression in science fiction can be perceived within the context of a specific social formation with its attendant superstructure. The hierarchy established by this value system reflects a social order which is fundamentally bourgeois in nature. (KS)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED136302

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH.
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

The Social Functions of Science Fiction: Some Notes on Methodology

(DRAFT)

By
Charles Elkins
Florida International University
Miami, Florida

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Charles Elkins

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

For
MLA Seminar
"The Sociology of Science Fiction"
December 29, 1976

S 203 246

The Social Functions of Science Fiction: Some Notes on Methodology

I. Let me begin this discussion by stating my basic methodological assumption: in contrast to a purely aesthetic approach, a sociological perspective studies science fiction as it relates to social order, to man's need for order in his relationships. By social order, I mean the structuring of social relationships through the communication of hierarchy, that is, the communication of roles by means of which people are grouped into classes, ranks, and status groups as superiors, inferiors, and as equals. Hierarchical communication is not primarily descriptive; rather, it can be thought of as persuasion taking place in dramatic forms whose frequent and "proper" enactment creates and sustains social order. We learn our "place" in society as we come to learn the meaning of our roles, by witnessing these dramatic enactments. Social order is a social drama in which actors struggle to sustain, destroy, or change the principles of order on which the hierarchy rests. Social order is always a resolution of the dramatic conflict involved in the acceptance, doubt, or rejection of the principles that are believed to guarantee order.

The need for order arises out of the very nature of human action. Action in the present is always ambiguous to some degree because it is moving into an unrealized future in which old forms of action may be useless. This need for order has one of its dimensions in the problematic circumstances of the social group and class of which the author is a part. Literature satisfies the "need" for order if one thinks of it as a strategic answer (i.e. stylized response) to questions posed by the conditions (the authors' and audiences') out of which it arose. By naming a situation in a particular way, the writer creates attitudes for himself and his readers. As Kenneth Burke would say, the writer creates "terms for order." As part of the middle class (the petit bourgeois), the major task of the science fiction writer is articulate the nature of and find resolutions for the role conflicts plaguing his particular audience, the technologically-minded middle class (usually, the professional sector of the petit bourgeois). The bases of these role conflicts are that while still in control, this group, as well as bourgeois society as a whole, is increasingly unable to cope with a future which promises to be radically different from the nineteenth-century, industrial society out of which bourgeois man arose. This new future demands a fundamental alteration in the social order and, hence, of the roles which constitute that order.

From the sociological view taken her, the specific social function of literature involves mystifying existing hierarchical structures, demystifying them, offering passage (through the use of metaphor) from one hierarchical structure to another and/or mystifying or demystifying alternative hierarchies. Although aesthetic questions are intimately involved in the issue of order (e.g. in determining what constitutes the "appropriate" way to play a role), the primary question for the sociologist of science fiction should be: how is social order depicted in science fiction, and how does this symbolic act relate to the structure and function of social action? Who is the hero, fool and villain of social order, and in the name of what principle(s)do they act? We should seek the terms, the principles by which the various contending voices in society are harmonized and what the author's attitude toward these principles is and how this attitude has been communicated to his readership. Readers are audiences who are moved to attitudes which are aroused as incipient stages of action; these attitudes pass into action through specific forms of communication (which are perfected in art) in which the audience identifies with various characters who accept, reject, or doubt the social principles they personify.

That society affects literature and literature affects society has been known for a long time, certainly as far back as Aristotle and Plato. A major contribution we could make as sociologists of literature and literary critics is to refrain from repeating truisms, even if we have learned to say them in a new and exotic jargon. The task is to show how literature and society affect one another. After all, is this not what method is all about? Until we create some workable propositions about what people use literature for, we will continue to repeat what has been said more clearly and eloquently by Taine and Marx, namely that literature is a "product" of social "forces" or a "reflection" of social "conditions." (It was important to say this in the last half of the nineteenth century if only to save literature from the dogma of aestheticism). We must continue not only to point out that literature arises in and is affected by social conditions but also that literture is used by audiences to adjust to, call into question, or reject the very principles upon which those conditions rest.

At the moment, what we still need are ideas about the communication of symbols which will permit us to investigate how artistic communication affects society and vice versa. We need to develop a functional perspective, i.e. how literature is used by various classes, institutions, groups to get into power, stay in power, destroy the power of others, elevate their positions and downgrade the positions of others, in short, how society uses literature to organize experience, but we must show how this is done in the work of art itself; we must show how the function of the work determines its forms.

Social order is created and sustained through the communication of hierarchy. In sociological terms, the major function of all literature is the communication of hierarchy through an exploration of the possibilities of human action, an exploration by the imagination -- as we act in social roles -- and the "naming" of that action. The structure of this function is dramatic. Social order is a social drama. Social order, which must always be studied as permanence in change, is created in struggle. In literature, this conflict takes the form of characters -- heroes, villains, and fool -- struggling to uphold, doubt, or destroy the principles of social order believed vital to social integration.

Audiences must be given heroes, villains and fools whose struggle to uphold or destroy the principles of social order is depicted in comprehensible dramas. This is necessary not because people cannot "think" or "reason" or because they respond only to appeals to their emotions, but because there is no way to understand what action signifies in human relationships unless it is shown as dramatic action. There is no way to learn how to act except by watching the action of others, by playing roles as children do when they imitate adult behavior,by playing actual roles, or by experiencing these roles in art before we commit ourselves to overt action. Art, especially narrative and dramatic art (because of their temporal nature), brings problems into consciousness (for the writers and the readers) by creating forms through which we can confront our problems in human relations as problems in role enactment. Until we create such forms, anxiety and conflict -- internally and externally -- cannot be controlled because they cannot be expressed.

Unlike religious ritual, art -- when it is free -- opens ends, purposes and values to inquiry. Criticism in art, as in science, is institutionalized. Art is the realm of change, ambiguity, argument and doubt -- i.e. conflict. Artists institutionalize doubt, not only through philosphical analysis and debate (as in education) or through experiments (as in science) but through the dramatic presentation of action as a struggle to create and sustain order. In most dramas of social order -- ceremonies, rites, festivals, parades, spectacles, trials, processions and other occasions when the community enacts its myths -- doubt, change and ambiguity are generally absent. In literature which is uncensored and not serving as an instrument of official messages, the ability to doubt, to sustain ambiguity and, at times, to even rebel against the sacred, prevailing principles of social order, through tragedy, comedy, irony, satire, burlesque, parody, etc., is not considered heretical, weak or treasonable, but simply the measure of courage, originality of the artist and his aesthetic triumph.

Literature seeks to open the ends of action to reason. The exploration in art is an investigation of how to enact roles, not a reduction of roles to environmental factors or a means of minimizing doubt through faith. The "argument" of literature is a dramatic one rather than a syllogistic one. Literature's power rests in how it presents us with symbolic forms of human interaction. Literature teaches us not so much how to "think about" relationships or how to "argue about' them, but how to create roles so that we can enact them in the social drama of community life. In the purely "formal" play of literature -- what the novelist, William Gass, calls the "stylization of desire" -- artists experiment with attitudes through their style; as the saying goes, "Style is the aesthetics of action."

II. To repeat my thesis: The major function of the science fiction writer is to describe the nature of and find resolutions to the role conflicts which vex his social group as it moves into the future. The writer's terms for ordering this conflict may either reinforce, call into question, or reject the principles upon which this group's existence depends. Traditionally, the author has done this by offering the reader radical dislocations in time and space. He changes the scene, environm,ent, focus, context, world, space and time itself, etc. in order to create a stage for action which will allow him to experiment with the roles thought required for his individual and his group's survival. Characters, as representative of various principles of social order, enact their roles on this new stage, which, by comparison with present reality, supports, questions or rejects the principles upon which the present order is based. The basic question is simply: will the roles sanctified by the past -- tradition, custom, law, etc -- and/or legitimated by the present "condition," be appropriate for confronting the novelty of an emerging future?

To answer part of that question, one might examine the kind of hero who personifies the professional, technologically orientated bourgeois. For heuristic purposes, one can construct an ideal type. He is young, male (almost always male). His speech, while punctuated with slang, is singularly unrhetorical; there is little in either the rhythms or the neutral vocabulary to betray region or class; his speech is unemotional and objective; he has adopted the language of the technologically orientated, managerial elite. One gets the feeling that his idiolect could be reproduced by a computer. He is intelligent, sometimes brilliant, poised, and courageous. His bravery is a combination of self control and an acceptance of "reality." He is a super technician, with a good deal of basic Yankee "know how" and a "gut" feeling for machines. He is absorbed in his work, and he views work as one of the most important aspects of experience, for himself and others. He is rational and empirical; knowledge is important but instrumental. His basic motivation is power, power sometimes gained through the accumulation of material wealth but more often through the acquisition of knowledge. He views ideas, physical nature and other men as instruments of that power. He dominates relationships because he accepts the reality of competition and the struggle in which one is either dominant or dominated. For him, life is a conflict with other men, with nature, and often with himself. He is rootless -- physically, intellectually, and socially. More than anything else, he is a loner, and an individualist. (My description owes much to Victor Ferkiss' Technological Man/New York: George Braziller, 1969/). He is often complex, beset by contradictory impulses, a combination of a nineteenth-century industrial entreprenurial, inner-directed, bourgeois Philistine and a twentieth century, post-industrial, apolitical technocrat.

As with the construction of all ideal types, one inevitably simplifies. However, I would argue that by stressing one or two of any of these character traits, one could accurately characterize the great majority of science fiction heroes, beginning with Verne's Barbicane and Wells' Bedford to the heroes of Heinlein and Azimov. He is the representative man of the professional sector of the petit bourgeois.

During the period -- until relatively recently -- when the fortunes of this subclass were rising, science fiction depicts optimistic futures and alternative worlds which tend to reinforce the roles personifying the principles upon which this group's existence rests. (Cf. Gerard Klein, "Discontent in American Science Fiction,"). The meaning of the roles, and hence the social order whose enactment they create are seldom questioned. The problem is not why but how to play the role. The "terms for order" are consistent with this group's world view.

This should not be surprising. A writer's ability to freely and imaginatively explore the possibilities of action is limited by his world view and the resources of language, both of which are in dialectical relationship with his social existence. Each conscious choice the writer makes -- and this is the essential meaning of freedom -- is taken within the context of a specific social formation with its attendent infrastructure and superstructure, characterized by a specific value system and, hence, hierarchy. And, for the most part, this hierarchy is part of the bourgeois social order which, in its ability to control the creation, distribution and consumption of symbols, has universalized its world view.

As a consequence, most science fiction (indeed most popular art) performs what is best described as a "magical" function. The self-conscious exploration of the meaning of various roles is seldom attempted; there is no critical examination of the means-ends relationship in action. The ends of action are seldom scrutinized. In its communication of alternative worlds and futures, survival usually involves "coping" in such a way as not to call into question the present social order. The function of most science fiction here is to maintain the attitudes necessary for success within existing social arrangements. Through naming these new situations and their attendent roles in such a way as to charge objects, actions and roles with sentiments needed to sustain the existing order, science fiction function much like the pep talk or the exhortation. As the writer "praises" and "curses," he inspires his readers with the attitudes necessary for playing their roles successfully. "No matter how different the future may be," says the writer, "do this and you will survive without having to reject your fundamental principles." Nineteenth-century and twentieth-century science fiction is filled with rugged, pragmatic, bourgeois individualists. The strength of this role is summarized, I think, when the hero of Jose Farmer's To Your Scattered Bodies Go turns out to be none other than Richard Burton, the archetypal Victorian explorer-imperialist-naturalist.

That most science fiction heroes personify this aspect of the bourgeois explains (especially if one understands the Marxian view of history and its characterization of the historical role of the bourgeois) why many of the heroes find themselves "liberating" static, isolated, feudal societies and opening them up to the rest of the Galactic empire. The ship of the famous Star Trek crew, The Enterprise, is appropriately named. The function of this kind of science fiction is to offer the reader ways (through processes of mystification and demystification) to destroy beliefs detrimental to the existence and growth of the bourgeois and to replace dysfunctional values with symbols charged with new values (e.g. by attaching ludicrous symbols to some roles and awe-inspiring symbols to others). It does not question the social order; its heroes are representatives of the writer's audience who must struggle to defeat those whose values are seen as a threat to this order.

At the same time, magic is used when we are unable to obtain what we want by other methods. We cannot control the future; all we really know is that it will be different than the present or past. We must use magic. One does not need to give a pep talk to his players if he knows that the game is "fixed." And while many science fiction writers see the future -- despite the incredible leaps in technological innovation -- as a familiar extrapolation of existing social structures, there are many indications that the future will be vastly different from the present -- or, we will have no future whatsoever. Moreover, the future demands the abolition of bourgeois man, just as the ice age demanded the abolition of the dinosaur. To celebrate in order to perpetuate the existing social order is not only inappropriate but suicidal. Even non-Marxists can see the problem; as Victor Ferkiss puts it:

> Bourgeois man is still in the saddle. Or to put it more accurately, things are in the saddle, since bourgeois man is increasingly unable to cope with his problems. At the same time, an existential revolution is under way that may destroy the identity of the human race, make society unmanageable and render the planet literally uninhabitable. Bourgeois man is incapable of coping with this revolution. [Ferkiss, p. 245.]

Some of the science fiction writers have become increasingly aware of this. The crisis in practically every phase of social life coupled with the rather abrupt loss of power and privilege of the professional-technocratic elite -- the group to whom science fiction has addressed itself -- has precipitated a crisis in confidence, in their identity and existence as a class, and in the future itself, for the writer and his readers. Gerard Klein has discussed the pessimistic character of recent science fiction in his article, "Discontent in American Science Fiction." I would only add that this loss of confidence can be seen in the science fiction writers' attempts to do more by way of exploring the meaning of roles, the why rather than the how of role enactment. (As the pragmatists were fond of saying, "It is only when one encounters obstacles to action that one begins to think.")

Most of what we would call genuine "speculative" science fiction falls into this category. Once one begins to examine the relationship between means and ends in social action or the meaning of a particular role, then the whole social order and the principles believed necessary for its existence can be questioned. Here, science fiction ceases to function exclusively as magic; instead, it explores through the imagination the possibilities of human action and what it means to act in a specific role. The main character often assumes the burden of having to resolve serious role conflicts and suffer the consequences. Often the hero assumes the position of a neutral observer, a non-partisan, a cultural anthropologist. (If he does not do this initially, he soon learns to do this in the course of the story.) Like the earlier heroes, he (and recently, she) is independent, apolitical or liberal, intelligent, brave, dedicated to work, a super technician, a rationalist/phenomenologist/empiricist, but unlike the earlier forerunners, he is less obsessed with power and domination of the economic sort and less apt to see the world in individualistically competitive terms. This new hero may see man more a part of nature than apart from it; he often attempts to define man and his place in the universe in terms of a mind-body-society-universe totality, where no part is meaningful outside the whole and where the creative principle of the universe is located within systems rather than in something external to them. He is more receptive to novelty. Indeed, from Stapleton's Star Maker, through A.E. van Vogt's Slan to Ursula LeGuin's The Left Hand of Darkness, the main character teaches us the dangers of ethnocentrism.

At their worst, the writers of these novels parallel the attitude of bourgeois scientists who refuse to go beyond simple description and merely concentrate on uninterpreted phenomena. As a novelistic technique, the result is often crude naturalism, with its usual counterpart, sensationalism, or even worse, a chronicle of one impossibility upon another, one absurd world upon another, one grotesque life-form after another, or one social impossibility after another. The only possible reader response is, "Gee, whiz," or "Isn't that interesting!" Pretty much anything goes, as long as it does not seem to harm anyone, at least in the short run. Freedom is usually defined in the negative; it is almost always freedom from something (e.g. the individual versus society), bourgeois freedom. In a sense, the socially acceptable role celebrated in these novels is a sort of libertarian laissez-faire, "live and let live" mentality. It is this ideology which Herbert Marcuse points out in his A Critique of Pure Tolerance is "an ideology of tolerance which in reality favors and fortifies the conservation of the status quo of inequality and discrimination." [A Critique of Pure Tolerance, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968),pp. 122-123] The irony of this bourgeois, liberal view is that it contradicts the new heroes' movements toward an inclusive integrated, holistic philosophy. It makes the bourgeois increasingly unable to cope with the effects of technological change (leaving it up to piecemeal planners, the anarchy of monoply capital and ad-hoc crisis management) and the future that it is bringing into existence. Today, many science fiction writers are communicating their uneasiness with these contradictions.

The lack of confidence many science fiction writers communicate regarding their audience's ability to cope with the future is generalized to include mankind proper, and the future these writers envision for the human race becomes increasingly more ominous. If role conflicts cannot be resolved in terms which will keep the existing social order intact and liberal freedoms preserved --and it seems clear that they cannot -- then we are given novels where solutions are left problematic -- e.g. in Brunner's Stand on Zanzibar or LeGuin's The Dispossessed -- or we are presented with one of two alternatives: the end of man or some "inhuman" solution. With the end of WWII and the consciousness of atomic/biological superweapons, many writers have come to see the future in cataclysmic terms. This is not an original vision, but it has taken on a new dimension in that man fails to control the devices of his own creation; it is man, not God, who is responsible for the holocaust. In some sense, however, the other alternative is even more disturbing because it takes the solutions to future problems out of man's hands entirely. Unable to assent to superficial solutions which depend upon the continuance of the present social order and unwilling to confirm the dire prophecies of their colleagues, more and more writers are taking refuge in quasi-mystical solutions which offer no place for man at all. Conflicts are terminated by the intervention of god-like creatures or powers, or man himself is transformed into something which approaches god-like status. This type of solution is not new; one can trace a variation of this teme as far back as Wells' War of the Worlds; however, the popularity of such works as Clarke's Childhood's End and Heinlein's Stranger in a Strange Land seem to indicate that it is enormously attractive now. The disturbing features of these solutions should not be overlooked; these works suggest that man cannot solve the problems which will confront him. It is an admission of failure by a group which feels itself impotent to institute the necessary changes needed to prepare itself for the challenge of the future.

Even in the best of these novels, with their satire of existing social order, there are few attempts to go beyond mere criticism and to create the necessary metaphors which will allow one to move from passive criticism of the status quo to active roles necessary for transforming the social order and producing genuine social change. The major omissions, of course, are roles which show man how to act collectively -- as opposed to the free, autonomous, rugged, individualistic bourgeois -- to change conditions. The emphasis is almost entirely on individual action rather than collective action. Without collective action, arrived at through democratic means, the individual is almost always defeated (unless, of course, he is a superman or has some super technology at his disposal). Moreover, his defeat serves to reinforce the notion ofan eternal invincible bourgeois order. Again, there seems to be a contradiction . It stems from a failure to relate roles to changes in technology and its socioeconomic consequences and the irreversibility in man's creation of new knowledge. It is not that individuals will be defeated by invincible bourgeois orders as it appears in most science fiction; any responsible forecasting for the remote future must face this proposition: "the socioeconomic effects of the scientific and technolgical revolution are in irreconcilable contradiction with the further existence of the capitalist mode of production" and the social order it expresses. [I. Bestuzhev-Lada, "Bourgeois 'Futurology' and the Future of Mankind," in The Futurists, ed. Alvin Toffler (New York: Random House, 1972), p.208.]

Moreover, this failure to relate role changes to changes in technology violates aesthetic as well as logical criteria. As critics are forever saying, each part of a work of art must be consistent with the whole. If one changes the scene, the space-time matrix (the context, the environment, society, etc.) and creates a genuine alternate world, then one cannot be artistically successful by leaving the characters unchanged. One's sense of organic unity requires that creating societies with radically different technologies demands radically different social orders --i.e. radically different roles. One can argue that man's basic drives will be unchanged. Man will still have to eat, procreate and express his aggression and creativity. However, even if one agrees with this assumption -- and given the possibilities of such things as genetic engineering, there is no reason for doing so (it seems to violate the imaginative vision of science fiction) -- it still remains that man's basic, unchanging drives must be expressed in specific forms, in specific roles which are determined by the social order within which he is located Our eating habits, our ways of expressing sexual drives, our modes of aggression and our styles of creation are not eternal.. A writer's ability to create a social order consistent with the imperatives of his technology is central to his imaginative vision. A failure of imaginative vision is a failure to achieve basic organic unity. It is a failure on the same order as his deficient political imagination; indeed, the two are inseparable. That is the meaning of harmony.