Selves and Spaces in Science Fiction

Davidson, Brett

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Abstract:
This thesis proposes a critical framework by which science fiction can be read as an indicator of significant trends and debates in science and culture. It takes as its starting point Brian Aldiss’s statement that science fiction’s purpose is to articulate in fictional form a definition of humanity and its status in the universe that will stand in the light of science. Science fiction exists as a means by which scientific concepts are constructed as cultural interpretations, and as both have changed significantly over the period from the emergence of the genre in the mid-nineteenth century through the twentieth century, analysis of science-fictional forms and practices can reveal the processes of their evolution. A critical framework is constructed based on Aldiss’ definition, identifying first, a construction of selfhood and spatiality—physical and metaphysical—as being fundamental, and secondly, identifying the emergence and evolution of major ‘Orders’ that take different approaches to key issues and which engage with each other both antagonistically and creatively. The thesis begins with an investigation of the cultural construction of space and then covers the emergence of science fiction as it relates to the project to define humanity and its standing in the universe in a manner consistent with science. Three Orders and their emergence are then described according to their architectonic schemata and their epistemological and creative processes. The first is the Modernist Order, based on Cartesian spatiality and mind-body dualism and empirical scientific practice. The second, which emerged as an attempt to synthesise modern science with traditional culture, is the Neohumanist Order. The third, still very much in flux, is the Posthumanist Order, which is very much inspired both by postmodernism and cybernetics. The three following chapters deal with the Orders in turn, selecting exemplary texts from their emergent and developed (or developing) stages, suggesting also the points in the development of each where another Order has disengaged and emerged in its own right. Because science and culture evolve over time, examination of the Orders is intrinsically linked to a concept of science fiction as being an ongoing discourse, each selected text is interpreted as being a response to a particular issue at a particular cultural moment, but nonetheless connected to predecessor and successor texts that represent a line of argument pursued over time within and between Orders. The Orders are not hermetic by any means, and their most enlightening aspects can be their varying treatment of a common concept. The cyborg furnishes an excellent example, being treated differently by each of the Orders as it is an image of the integration of humanity and technology. Issues such as self, body, boundary, location, the other and communication are all represented in the cyborg and the next two chapters discuss the cyborg as treated by different Orders, in the first case, as a body and in the second case, as an inhabitant and creation of architectonics and culture. The conclusion then discusses the current state of affairs regarding the system of Orders as a critical method. It is shown that ‘impure’ texts that contain aspects of each of the Orders do not negate their usefulness, but rather demonstrate it as texts (and postmodern texts in particular) provide stages on which the Orders can be displayed engaging with each other.

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