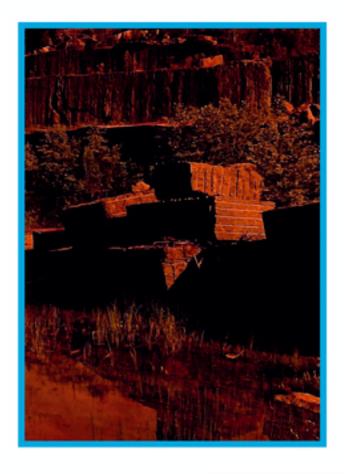# SHOCKWAVES OF POSSIBILITY

ESSAYS ON SCIENCE FICTION, GLOBALIZATION, AND UTOPIA

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Preface

I was sorely tempted to begin this book with what has become one of the most over-used figures in contemporary literary and cultural studies scholarship, a figure drawn from the extraordinary opening of Marx and Engels' 1848 *Manifesto of the Communist Party* and in which interest was renewed after the publication of Jacques Derrida's *Spectres de Marx: l'état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (1993): A specter is haunting contemporary science fiction studies—the specter of Utopia. It will be a central contention of this book that Utopianism is not simply one among a range of possible themes or motifs in modern science fiction—as, say, technology, time travel, telepathy, teleportation, alien encounters, alternate histories, post-apocalypse, the far future, utopia, or dystopia, all of which Mark Rose in his anatomy assembles under the more abstract and inclusive categories of space, time, machine, and monster (*Alien Encounters* 32), and which Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. describes as various incarnations of the "seven beauties of science fiction" (fictive neology, fictive novums, future history, imaginary science, science fictional sublime, science-fictional grotesque, the technologiade) (*Seven Beauties* 5–7). Rather, Utopianism is fundamental to very narrative dynamic of this vital modern practice.

Such an assertion may strike some as behind the times, for there seems to be something decidedly old-fashioned about the question of science fiction's Utopianism, redolent as it is of the unruly counter-cultural days of the field's youth, and out-of-place in a maturing discipline, or at least a disciplinary sub-specialization, seeking proper academic respectability. Science fiction studies often undertakes the quest for legitimacy under the aegis of a sociological or popular culture studies inclusiveness that flies in the face of conservative disciplinary retrenchments such as those of the new formalists or surface readers—who seek, in Marjorie Levinson's words, "to bring back a sharp demarcation between history and art, discourse and literature, with form ... the prerogative of art" ("What is" 559); and, as Crystal Bartolovich

maintains, "not only mark a pointed withdrawal from politics and theory but also—while humanities departments are contracting—internalize the economic imperative to scale back" ("Humanities" 116). In the latter regard, such humanities scholarship embraces what Steven Shaviro describes as the more general logic of contemporary global neo-liberalism: "at every turn, the demand for an exclusive *either/or* replaces the coziness and ease of *both/and*. In short, even as it produces greater material wealth than ever before in human history, capitalism also continually manufactures scarcity and want" (*Connected* 221). I discuss these historical and institutional issues in more detail in Chapter Five.

However, despite these very different starting points, the end result can be the same: the transformation of cultural criticism, and indeed culture itself (read here as science fiction), into an antiquarianism or specialist's narrow provenance, becoming what Bertolt Brecht refers to as *folgenlos*, an intervention that "had no particular material consequences, and fostered no particular change," and which Brecht thereby identifies as the very form of "being ideological" (Jameson, *Brecht* 25). Furthermore, in disciplining, reifying, and isolating science fiction studies in this way we risk, as other once vibrant interdisciplinary projects such as film and American studies seem at times to have done, reinforcing the walls of our ghetto in the larger academic field. One of my aims in this book is to show that not only does science fiction studies have a tremendous amount to learn from a range of other projects (critical theory, as Carl Freedman taught us, but also cultural studies, American studies, modernist studies, film studies, to name only a few sites of convergence), it has tremendously important lessons to teach them as well.

Moreover, as Theodor Adorno argues for the more general critical "notion of culture as ideology," to distance science fiction studies from the question of Utopianism is to throw out the baby with the bathwater, to get rid along "with the false, all that was true also" (*Minima Moralia* 44). For it is precisely its Utopianism that distinguishes modern science fiction, the technically complex or so called "high" cultural as well as the most popular or commercial expressions, both from precursors such as the fable, travel narrative, gothic, and *voyages extraordinaires*, and contemporary practices of prognostication or futurology. In short, what Fredric Jameson

describes as the "desire called Utopia" at work in all science fiction is also a matter of the *desire for narrative* (and which, for Jameson, is at one with the "desire for Marx," and for Antonio Negri, "the passion for totality"), and not, as often assumed, of representation (Jameson, *Ideologies of Theory* Vol. 1 xxviii; Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx* 13). It is here where the practice of science fiction's constitutive force and continued significance reside.

I am also interested in the following pages in the ways in which contemporary science fiction in a rich variety of its manifestations helps us come to grips with and respond to the various social, cultural, political and economic transformations bundled together under the imprecise but nevertheless inescapable concept-term *globalization*. That is, another crucial desire of contemporary science fiction is to think the global (but then again, perhaps this is the goal, whatever other significant ones may be at work, of all contemporary cultural production). "Always historicize!" Jameson famously implores us (and implicitly, always totalize!), and the chapters in this book unfold by way of a fidelity to the truth of this "one absolute and we may even say 'transhistorical' imperative of all dialectical thought" (*Political Unconscious* 9). Shaviro makes a similar point in the opening pages of his diagnosis of our contemporary global "network society:" following the lead of Freedman, Shaviro maintains that "science fiction is the privileged genre (literary, cinematic, televisual, and digital) for contemporary critical theory ... science fiction and critical theory alike are engaged in the task of what Jameson calls the 'cognitive mapping' of postmodern space" (*Connected* x).

Because of its potential effectiveness in confronting our emerging global situation, and despite occasional warnings by some camps of its imminent demise, science fiction, in a variety of different media and forms, has in the last two decades experienced a resurgence (the British Boom and Hollywood big budget blockbusters being only two of its most explicit manifestations), while also becoming an increasingly central aspect of mainstream "literary" fiction (Margaret Atwood, Junot Díaz, Kazuo Ishiguro, David Mitchell, Mikael Niemi, Colson Whitehead, Charles Yu); and even, if Eric D. Smith is correct, displacing in postcolonial fiction more generally the centrality of the older narrative practice of magical realism.

In my efforts to understand how these forms and individual works *think* our emerging situation, the work of the chapters collected together here is intimately related to that of my earlier book, *Life Between Two Deaths, 1989–2001: U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties* (2009). *Shockwaves of Possibility* does, of course, appear after *Life Between Two Deaths*, and many of its chapters were conceived and executed after the crystallization of that book's central conceit, and thus very much expand upon, develop, and rethink some of the arguments first presented in that earlier study (while also maintaining a fidelity to its primary claims). At the same time, however, there are ways in which *Shockwaves of Possibility precedes* the earlier book, as this was the project I was first working on in the early years of this millennium. Indeed, a number of the chapters that ended up in *Life Between Two Deaths*—those on the film *Independence Day*, Joe Haldeman's brilliant *Forever* trilogy, the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and Octavia Butler's *Parable* novels—were at one time scheduled to be included in an earlier version of the volume you are reading. Just as the singular world historical event known as 9/11 transformed in sometimes unexpected ways our understanding of both the nature and processes of globalization (the significant shifts that occur between Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* [2000] and *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* [2004] might serve as a good indicator of this fact), so too these developments forced me to reconsider some of the claims that, in an alternate history, would have been advanced in this later book. Thus, as in Robert Heinlein's classic tale of the paradoxes of time travel, "'All You Zombies—'" (1959), each of these two studies should be understood as at once the predecessor and successor to the other, both parent and offspring. In my own mind at least, I find it increasingly difficult to disentangle one from the other: "I *know* where *I* came from ..." (36).

Moreover, the intertextual knot grows even more complicated as *Life Between Two Deaths* and *Shockwaves of Possibility* form, along with my other recent book, *Periodizing Jameson: Dialectics, the University, and the Desire for Narrative*, a trilogy of sorts, all three representing experiments in the storytelling practice of *periodization*.[1] Whereas the former study develops a series of historical periodizations unfolding on a number of different spatial and temporal scales—the Cold War and post-Cold War periods, the

"micro-periodizations" of the 1990s and what we might call the Age of the War on Terror, 2001–8 (whether the third fall, that of 2008, represents the beginnings of another period is a question I touch on in Chapters Six and Nine)—the latter book performs an even more local periodization of distinct moments in the intellectual career of Jameson—the realism of *Marxism and Form* (1971), the modernism of *The Political Unconscious* (1981), and, not surprisingly, the postmodernism of *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991)—as well as the insights such an approach might offer to the more general transformations that occur in US academic culture and humanist intellectual work in the post-Second World War moment.

The work of periodization undertaken in *Shockwaves of Possibility* in fact builds upon an experiment staged provisionally in a review essay that became the final chapter of *Periodizing Jameson*. This experiment is further elaborated in the opening sections of Chapter One into a double periodizing history of the genre, practice, or, as I would have it, the technology (*techné*) of modern science fiction. My central contention here is that while *all* science fiction is, in its very "ideology of form," modernist, coming into being as an especially effective means of responding to the particularities of the historical situation named modernism, we also see a sequence of different moments or periods, each defined by a different cultural dominant, in the practice's now more than century-long history. This opens up onto a very interesting question of whether in the last two decades we might ascertain another distinct period within the practice, one where the machinery of science fiction is again retooled in order to make it responsive to the emerging realities of globalization.

The subsequent chapters of the book are assembled under three broad concept terms, "Eventa l Genres," "Possible Worlds," and "Alternate Histories." In the latter part of the first chapter, I explore the value of thinking about the labor of science fiction in terms of what the philosopher Alain Badiou describes as the *event*, and conclude that discussion with readings of exemplary science fiction by H.G. Wells, Alfred Bester, and Ursula K. Le Guin. In Part One, I unpack science fiction's relationship to a meta-practice I name the *evental genres*, which, in addition to science fiction, encompasses the *Künstlerroman*, the comedy of remarriage, and the

universal history. The first two chapters in the section each examine paired texts—Arkady and Boris Strugatskys' novel, *Roadside Picnic*, and Andrei Tarkovsky's film "adaptation," *Stalker*; and Toni Morrison's *Paradise* and Paola Bacigalupi's award-winning debut novel, *The Windup Girl*—as a way of teasing out some of the relationships between science fiction and its kin, the comedy of remarriage and the universal history respectively. The final chapter in the section continues to mine this vein, exploring the original hybrid of science fiction and *Künstlerroman* that is William Gibson's post-9/11 novel, *Pattern Recognition*.

The title of the second section is taken from an essay by Darko Suvin, one of the pioneers in science fiction and utopian studies, and someone whose work figures prominently in the stories I have to tell. In "Locus, Horizon, and Orientation," Suvin introduces the axiom that "any utopian novel is in principle an ongoing feedback dialogue with the reader" (*Defined* 121). This leads him to postulate the important concept of utopian "possible worlds," induced in the reader's imagination by "the interaction between the fictional elements presented in a text and the presuppositions of the implied reader" (*Defined* 126). To challenge the lingering commonplace that utopian fictions necessarily represent closed static worlds, Suvin introduces the twinned concepts of "locus" and "horizon," and on this basis generates a fourfold schema of these possible worlds: "open-ended or dynamic utopia," "closed or static utopia," "heterotopia," and "abstract or non-narrative utopia/nism" (*Defined* 129). While Suvin's notion of possible worlds is most immediately on display in my discussion of Ken MacLeod's rich and complex "The Fall Revolution" quartet, I mean the term also to indicate the range of different possible science fiction media worlds that I touch on in these chapters: this includes fiction (MacLeod's four novels and Philip K. Dick's *Ubik*), television (*The X-Files*), Hollywood blockbuster films (*The Da Vinci Code*, and the 2008–9 quartet of *WALL-E*, *The Dark Knight*, *Watchmen*, and *Terminator Salvation*), and comics and the graphic novel (Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*). In each case, I am interested in the lessons these texts have to teach us both about the genre or media in which they participate and the particular global situation to which they respond. In terms of the latter then, I take as another axiom guiding my readings as what Jameson names

the *geopolitical unconscious*, "a conceptual instrument for grasping our new being-in-the-world." Jameson goes on to maintain: "It may henceforth be thought to be at least one of the fundamental allegorical referents or levels of all seemingly abstract philosophical thought: so that a fundamental hypothesis would pose the principle that all thinking today, is *also*, whatever else it is, an attempt to think the world system as such. All the more true will this be for narrative figurations" (*Geopolitical Aesthetic* 3–4).

I take up Jameson's notion of the geopolitical unconscious again in the first chapter of the book's final section. These three chapters are concerned with what I still find to be one of the most interesting of the science fictional subgenres, that of alternate histories. In the first two chapters of the section, focused on MacLeod's *The Human Front* and Iain M. Banks's *Transition* and Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Years of Rice and Salt*, I map out some of the aspects of the practice and history of the alternate history itself, before examining the ways these texts help us think about some of the dramatic changes that have occurred in our global situation during the course of the period of 2001–9. Finally, I conclude the book on a more lyrical note, with a look back at one of the masterpieces of modern Japanese animé, Hayo Miyazaki's *My Neighbor Totoro*, a film which develops a deeply moving vision of an "epoch of rest," one that was not but may have been. In this way, Miyazaki's film, as all of the works studied in this book, undertake the vitally important work of educating our desire for precisely these rich and diverse other possible worlds and alternate histories—and in this labor we may begin to discover science fiction's most important task of all.

Notes

1   The genealogies of these three books is further complicated by the fact that a number of the chapters in *Shockwaves of Possibility* also contain some of my first experiments with the reconfiguration of A.J. Greimas's semiotic square that I undertake in full in "Greimas avec Lacan," a revised version of which appears as the centerpiece of *Periodizing Jameson*.