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Introductory reflections on the science fiction images and its legacies in visual culture and beyond.

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Science Fiction Images: The Otherness and the Legacy of SF

Science fiction is both ubiquitous and elusive. On the one hand, recognising it seems trivial. All one needs to do is identify a piece of cultural text as scien ce fiction. On the other hand, it becomes problematic when we want to grasp it conceptually and theoretically. An attempt to pin it down leads to a semantic "dance" reminiscent of disputes over the definition of media. No wonder then that almost every monograph devoted to science fiction begins with a review of previous attempts to define the phenomenon, followed by a proposal for a new, original one. Problems arise with the name itself. Do science fiction, SF, and sci-fi mean the same thing? (Noteworthy, in this issue, we use them interchangeably.) Is SF only science fiction or perhaps also speculative fiction? When working on a definition, we face the challenge of finding a specific ontology of SF and deciding whether we are dealing with a literary genre, an intermedia genre, a system, an aesthetic, or perhaps something more? In this issue of *View*, we approach "something more," treating science fiction as a cultural practice, or perhaps even more broadly, as a set of cultural practices covering a wide spectrum of various phenomena.

Karoliona Jarzębak, Monument for JustinRPG, mixed media,140x70x59 cm, 2024. Courtesy of the artist.

In recent years, there has been a growing tendency to position science fiction as an important artistic, cultural, and epistemological practice that demands renewed, and at the

same time more profound, academic reflection. This change stems not only from the renaissance of the genre in various media forms (films, series, comics, podcasts, and video games) and the growing importance of fan and participatory culture, but also from a profound transformation of the cultural paradigm. The promise of the "end of history," as described by Francis Fukuyama, has given way to an awareness of "planetary catastrophe" – climatic, ecological, political, and social – that now compels us to rethink the future and the imagination.

In this context, we should see the formal and thematic diversity of science fiction as a promising field for interdisciplinary analysis, where literary, media, anthropological, philosophical, and political perspectives intersect. Science fiction not only reflects the social moods, collective imaginations, and ideologies of a given era, but also, as Richard Barbrook[1] notes, participates in the process of constructing the future, actively charting its possible trajectories and influencing where culture, technology, and politics are heading. Moreover, science fiction intensifies the relationship between the past, present, and future. As Fredric Jameson notes, every vision of the future projects the desires and fears of the present while reinterpreting the past.[2]

One of the key themes of science fiction remains the development of technology and, more importantly, its impact on humans, society, and the cultural order. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that since the genre's inception, its creators have explored new technologies and media, and over time, to use Paul Levinson's terminology, also "new new media" and even "imagined media." Science fiction, understood both descriptively and genealogically, is "fiction about science and technology," a form of narrative in which technoscientific processes and their social consequences become the basic material of the story.

Almost from the very beginnings of science fiction, a broadly understood visuality complemented its literary nature. Determining a "zero point" would probably be a rather pointless

exercise in arbitrariness. However, let us mention one of the first films in the history of cinema, the groundbreaking *A Trip to the Moon* (*Le Voyage dans la Lune*, 1902) – a mere dozen or so minutes long adaptation of both *From the Earth to the Moon* (Jules Verne) and *The First Men in the Moon* (H.G. Wells), directed by Georges Méliès. However, both media historians and SF historians could probably shift this boundary at will. After all, for many readers, Verne's novels would also be incomplete without illustrations, and they would deem unfit the description of the French beginnings of SF without Alberto Robida's graphics.

Science fiction is a tool for speculative thinking and building imaginary worlds that are deeply connected to the present, going far beyond entertainment. In turn, the visual cultures of science fiction (as Paweł Frelik calls them) define a common field of cultural references for broad social groups, shaping our thinking about the future and the present. All this allows us to talk about the visual cultures of science fiction and even the aesthetics of science fiction.

Among other things, we may attribute the particular significance of the "visuality" of science fiction to the need to mitigate the "cognitive estrangement"[3] (as Darko Suvin puts it), caused by descriptions of non-existent technology, the near or distant future, and above all, radical otherness, i.e., *nomen omen*, aliens. In addition to plans and technical drawings for SF, visualisations of *other* places, landscapes, and species are also important.

However, the problem of otherness and alienation shifts the focus of reflection from technology and media to historical and ideological conditions. As Greg Grewell notes, "at the heart of most science fiction narratives lies a colonial narrative, regardless of whether science fiction readers and viewers easily recognise it."[4] Thus, science fiction carries the genealogical "blemish" of colonialism and imperialism, systems of thought and representation that shaped the modern Western imagination.

The birth of science fiction narrative coincides with the era of the formation of the colonial gaze and the Orient as constructs of the modernizing Western culture. In this sense, we may read science fiction as a specific form of the imperial gaze, which reorganizes reality in terms of expansion, domination, and cultural hierarchies.

An analysis of the development of SF as a literary genre shows that, alongside technological narratives, it has consistently explored themes of travel, conquest, trade, and armed conflict, projecting the history of colonization onto other times and spaces. In this context, media, machines, and technologies, understood in the spirit of Marshall McLuhan as "extensions of man," function as tools for controlling ever-expanding areas – up to and including outer space, often referred to as "the final frontier" (a phrase made famous by the television series Star Trek: "space, the final frontier"). Therefore, we may read science fiction as a sphere of cultural practices in which imperial fantasies transform into narratives of exploration and colonization of "new worlds."

In this context, the figure of the "alien" takes on central importance, bringing out the ambivalence of colonial discourse and SF practices. In science fiction, alienness is at once a threat, a promise of wisdom, and a way of negotiating one's own identity as suggested, among others, by Donna Haraway, reinterpreting the boundaries between humans, machines, and animals.[5] Moreover, "aliens" often serve as special forms of reference to the familiar. In linguistic practice, beings labelled as such often turn out to be transformed versions of entities known to us, i.e., excluded people, animals, insects, fungi, or plants.

In the 1880s, the analogy between aliens from outer space and aliens, i.e., representatives of non-Western cultures, was so obvious that, in an article discussing policy toward the indigenous peoples of the USA, George S. Wilson used the figure of a reverse invasion by aliens and reverse colonization. "Suppose a superior race came from another planet and found us to be inferior and

barbaric by their standards, as we consider Indians by our standards. And suppose they conquered us and put us in reservations,"[6] he wrote in the Atlantic Monthly. On the one hand, contact with an alien, higher or differently developed civilization was supposed to explore and exploit the fears that Western societies, including those functioning in appropriated territories, experienced with every rebellion or revolution. Usually, it was the fear of revenge, which, once pseudonymized, people could express and visualize.

On the other hand, when SF creators placed themselves in the position of the conquered, dominated, or alien, they had to engage in intellectual work based not on science or technology, but rather on the natural and social sciences, such as ethnographic research. Science fiction writers who achieved timeless recognition and could put themselves in the shoes of the other often were simply equipped with what Andrzej Mencwel calls "anthropological imagination"[7] – the ability to envision and transcend the boundaries of "humanity." Science fiction has developed a whole visual and textual apparatus for speculating and creating images of inhuman otherness, starting with sociology and Darwinism (including social Darwinism) and arriving at anthropology, ethnography, and contemporary queer theories.

However, one gets the impression that in the popular perception, in the sphere of social imaginaries, people often see this otherness as something "non-scientific," disordered, which science fights against using technology. Perhaps this opposition also stems from the colonial perspective, the colonial modus operandi, embedded in science fiction and in science itself. It has often been the task of scientists to justify the development of the empire and build well-functioning colonies. Understanding the other was supposed to lead to their domestication.[8] The other ceases to be such when one draws it into the register of otherness, catalogues it, and subjects it to the power of orders

and systems. Although constructed based on this systematics, images of otherness are supposed to produce a final effect that conceals the path taken to achieve it.

Images of alien organisms and unknown worlds of space/the future are specific accelerators of change and allow us to become familiar with otherness. However, they are also immersed in contemporary conventions and anxieties. The bodies of aliens, in which skin color, posture, or head shape become important, lead us straight to nineteenth-century anthropological theories.

The development of a systematic description of the world and its familiarization meant that people began to seek radical otherness more and more intensively in imaginary lands (often magical rather than science fiction) lying beyond the accessible means of communication of time and space: on other planets, in the distant future, etc. Thus, science fiction reproduced programs of colonization and fascination with distant, unknown countries, from islands to galaxies. In the post-war era, when being a colonizer became (officially) synonymous with backwardness, space flights became a symbol of modernity. Colonial discourse moved into extraterrestrial space. Not only into science fiction novels, comics, and films, but also into utopian fantasy in the public sphere, i.e., in politics.

Hence, science fiction enables a paradoxical cultural practice. On the one hand, it allows us to continue to represent the aspects hidden, tabooed, or repressed in the Enlightenment tradition of the West because deemed anachronistic and "unworthy" of modernity, namely racism, exclusion, slavery, genocide, eugenics, and total war. On the other hand, science fiction performs the opposite movement: it familiarizes and emancipates the aspects previously invisible and silenced as too progressive or strange. We may interpret such narrative strategies in the spirit of Gayatri Spivak as an attempt to allow the subaltern to speak[9] – to make visible those who remained outside the dominant order

of representation.

In this sense, science fiction functions as a "shadow zone" of modernity, a space where we push awkward content and a laboratory for narrative experimentation with possible futures. Science fiction can serve as both an archive of past ideas and an avant-garde capable of anticipating social and technological changes and reconfiguring how we may understand them.

Consequently, alongside images of technology and technique, it is representations of otherness, figures of the other, that we should consider fundamental to the visuality of science fiction. Science fiction not only reproduces colonial imaginaries but also destabilizes them, turning speculative space into a place for negotiating identity, power, and possible futures.

In the first of two issues of *View* devoted to images of SF and prepared in collaboration with the SF_PL Science Fiction Research Team operating at the Institute of Polish Culture of the University of Warsaw, the colonial heritage and encounter with otherness were our starting point. However, this does not mean that every text in the issue directly refers to the connections between science fiction and colonial discourse. The editors of *View* and the authors are primarily interested in the meaning of specific science fiction images, i.e., their hermeneutic potential. How has the aesthetics of SF changed over the decades? What do they express? What ideas did they shape in the past, and what ideas do they shape today? The presented texts answer these questions. Their aim is not to provide a monographic overview, but rather to trace and interpret various practices.

In the opening section, CLOSE-UP, we present two texts that introduce the history of science fiction and the genealogy of images of otherness. The translation of the introductory chapter of John Rieder's book *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* introduces the Polish academic audience to some of the most brilliant research on science fiction. An article by Agnieszka

Haska complements Rieder's concept. Haska focuses primarily on images of extraterrestrial beings in the period before the term science fiction became widespread. She analyzes the xenological iconography of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century on the example of science fiction literature, considering film and press discourse. Haska investigates how ideas about extraterrestrial life form and their cultural determinants – from religious and scientific inspirations, through Eurocentric colonial narratives, ideas of racial and gender superiority, to visions of human-machine hybrids and the dominance of the iconographic image of "greys" or "little green men." In doing so, she shows how particular types of these visual representations have undergone changes and transformations, and which of them have proved most enduring and thus maintained their presence in popular culture to this day.

In turn, drawing on queer theories in both SF works and theoretical reflection, including cultural analysis of science fiction, allows us to look at the imperial-colonial legacy from yet another angle. Can we consider drawing on unrealized visions and projecting an imagined future, one that is also intertwined with the past, a queer domain? Jędrzej Burszta ponders whether these speculative works undermine the critique of postmodern nostalgia as a model of conservative, commercialized, aggressively normative politics "without a future." Drawing on films from the cyberpunk series *The Matrix*, the author explores whether the persistent lingering of the past in the future within the contemporary SF landscape offers an opportunity to examine tensions in current queer politics.

Jagoda Tyczyńska's article, the final piece in this section, analyzes Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* as a cinematic response to the political climate of Donald Trump's first term, focusing particularly on how it depicts working-class empathy and solidarity across class divisions. Referring to an analysis of key scenes and genre conventions, Tyczyńska argues that the

film creates a liberal vision of reconciliation between the working class and the Other, which attempts to erase real class tensions through a naïve image of emotional reconciliation.

In the PANORAMA section, we present another analysis of the image of an encounter with cosmic otherness, this time using the example of Denis Villeneuve's film *Arrival.* In his text, Piotr Sitarski proposes Marian iconography and spirituality as the interpretative key. On the other hand, Marek Kawka tackles the subject of online content and ADHD. This topic is only seemingly distant from images of alien science fiction. In the analyzed online content, the anthropomorphic brain plays the main role, which refers to the catalogue of visual stereotypes of aliens from Haska's article.

The section concludes with an article by Angelika Niewiadomska on the Bulgarian space program. The conquest and colonization of space through sending a citizen into orbit became a fantasy of power on both sides of the Iron Curtain after the Second World War, and cosmonauts and astronauts became heroes of the mass imagination. We can trace an attempt to implement this type of national science fiction world-building in Bulgaria by examining the role of space and science fiction imagery during the era of Todor Zhikov and its contemporary artistic afterimages.

In the twentieth century, colonies were the subject of various speculative fictions, including the vision of a New Poland built in the desert, which was popular at the beginning of the century. According to the rules of colonial discourse, desertification was defined as an area without valuable nature, developed civilization or the protectorate of another colonial power. The fantasy of a city built in the desert is still very much alive in today's visions of modernization. Dubai and some capitals of modernizing countries, and formerly Gdynia, are cities straight out of science fiction, with no past (or at least with a past pushed to the margins). However, one does not have to look that far to

find a peculiar variation on the theme of the future imagined as a highly developed civilization "landing" like a spaceship "in the middle of nowhere," i.e., where the existing reality matters little to modernizers, who prioritize their vision of a modern future. In VIEWPOINT, we offer the opportunity to look at projects and practices occurring in the era of late capitalism, specifically around the Polish Central Communication Port.

The issue concludes with SNAPSHOTS and two reviews. Piotr Słodkowski writes about *In the Eye of the Storm: Modernism in Ukraine* at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź while Justyna Chmielewska follows the three-legged cat of the 18th Istanbul Biennial.

1 Richard Barbrook, *Imaginary Futures From Thinking Machines to the Global Village* (Pluto Press, 2007).

2 Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (Verso, 2007).

3 Simon Spiegel, "Things Made Strange: On the Concept of "Estrangement" in Science Fiction Theory" Science Fiction Studies, *35*(3) (2008), 369–385.

4 Greg Grewell, "Colonizing the Universe: Science Fictions Then, Now,and in the (Imagined) Future," *Rocky Mountain Review of Languageand Literature*: *55*(2), (2001), 26.

5 Donna J. Harraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women The Reinvention of Nature* (Oxon, 1991).

6 George S. Wilson, "How Shall the American Savage Be Civilized?," Atlantic Monthly, November 1882.

7 Andrzej Mencwel, Wy*obraźnia antropologiczna* (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2006).

8 For more see: Diane Lewis, *Anthropology and Colonialism*, "Current Anthropology" 1973 14:5, s581-602; Jack Goody, *The Expansive Moment: The Rise of Social Anthropology in Britain and Africa, 1918-1970*, Cambridge 1995.

9 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (London, 1994) 66–111.