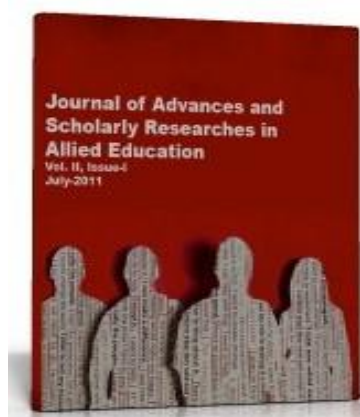# PROTOTYPE WORLDS AND CHARACTERS IN SELECTED SCIENCE FICTION

MR. ANIL KUMAR

Research Scholar, Singhania University
Rajasthan, INDIA

ABSTRACT

This paper examines prototype worlds and characters in selected Science Fiction (SF) texts. It utilises certain principles of I.A Richard‟s Practical Criticism, particularly in relation to "sense" and "intention", as the analytical framework. It is found that the analysis of the worlds and characters reveals the authors‟ intention i.e. his aim, conscious or unconscious, and the effect that is promoted to the readers. The words used by the authors to describe the SF worlds and characters have a task to perform and that is to convey meaning to readers so that they can make sense of what is being communicated. This approach, although described as outdated by some, is useful especially for higher education students who are studying this genre for the first time. The texts included in the analysis are China Mieville‟s novel *Perdido Street Station*, Ted Chiang‟s

novella "Liking What You See: A Documentary" as well as two short stories - Mike Resnick‟s "The Elephants on Neptune" and Michael Swanwick‟s "The Dead".

SCIENCE FICTION CRITICISM

When discussing the trends in Science Fiction (SF) criticism, one must first recognize that this area of study is very much dependant on the critic‟s own definition of the genre. According to Evans (1999), a number of critics argue that SF predates the 20th century - with writings by Edgar Allen Poe, Jules Verne and Mary Shelley to name a few– thereby broadening the genre. Evans (1999) identifies Keppler, who wrote in the early 17th century, as the first critic of SF. As such Keppler was interested in the answers to three questions frequently asked by pre-modern literary critics:

[W]hat was the *author's intent* in this fictional work…What *tradition* was he part of and who were those authors who inspired him…And how does this work reflect the *historical milieu* in which it was written?" (Evans 1999)

Other early SF critics however, downplayed the seriousness of this genre and labelled it as a source of "intellectual amusement". However, the eighteenth century gave birth to criticisms with more convictions where SFs‟ "satiric content or their scientific- philosophical didacticism" (Evans 1999) were highlighted. The criticisms of 19th century SF further highlighted the significance of this genre by acknowledging its persuasive power especially of those utilising scientific and historical extrapolations as Evans (1999) asserts:

This new sense of historical perspective is discernible, for example, in several critical studies from the early nineteenth century targeting, in whole or in part, the chronological evolution of this unique brand of fiction: Henry William Weber‟s Popular Romances (1812), portions of

John Colin Dunlop‟s History of Fiction (1814), and especially Félix Bodin‟s prophetic preface9 to his Le Roman de l‟avenir (The Novel of the Future, 1834) wherein he sketches out the blueprint for an entirely new type of novel...

Nevertheless a central concern that runs through the early criticism on SF is the issue of verisimilitude – the appearance of truth, actuality or reality. Evans noted how H.G. Wells emphasised on the need for verisimilitude in order for "the genre‟s potential for „looking at human feelings and human ways, from [a] new angle‟‟ to be realised. In other words, it is important for the SF genre to maintain some form of realism within its

„fantastic‟ nature so that it may still appeal to readers and deepen "natural reactions of wonder, fear or perplexity‟‟ towards a   particular phenomenon. In relation to verisimilitude, a milestone in SF criticism is William‟s article *Science Fiction*. In this short ideological critique, Williams argued that SF texts worthy of criticism, are those that portray an extension of contemporary social tendencies as opposed to those dealing with tropes so unconnected to contemporary society, a feature initially thought to be characteristic and definitive of SF genre.

In the last 20 years of the 20th century, literary studies have witnessed a further development in SF criticism. According to Veronica Hollinger (1999) "[t]he past two decades have seen an explosion of critical writing about [Science Fiction]". Hollinger also highlights three main trends developing in the area of SF criticism. The first is related to studies relating to the history of SF, the genre of SF, SF as represented in the media as well as studies done towards contributing to SF reference guides. The second trend is one that calls our attention to a body of critical works on SF by SF authors themselves. This trend also includes author interviews as well as autobiographies. The third trend, according to Hollinger, involves a transformation in SF studies. This trend is one that focuses on the feminist and postmodernist studies of SF.   Hollinger further argues that the widespread interest in the genre of SF has also allowed for "new perspectives in critical

and theoretical frameworks" to find a rich source of cultural material in this genre. The study of SF from a feminist perspective, for example, has allowed for an interrogation into "gendered subjectivity" and feminist SF itself has offered alternative gender representations, resisting conventional gender portrayals in realist fiction.

This review shows that various critical approaches have been utilised in further enriching the understanding as well as the study of SF genre. Nevertheless, numerous studies on the teaching and learning of SF have also shown that readers, especially those who are first time readers of SF, are resistant towards the genre. Gunn (1996) states, "[r]eaders do not recognize it, as they recognize other genres, because of some defining event or setting". My own experience in the teaching of SF is also similar. As such, this research does not fit in with the trends in SF studies stipulated by Hollinger as Practical Criticism has no obvious connections to any theoretical approaches. However, it is an experiment in promoting an ancillary approach that would help first time readers or resistant readers of SF make meaning out of the texts.

DEFINING THE GENRE

The division of literature known as Science Fiction (SF) is not easy to define, though most people will have some sense of what it entails. In general, the main focus of SF is on action and the imagined worlds rather than on portraying fully developed characters. However, subtle analysis or observations of human behaviour are becoming more and more present especially in soft SF (as this paper will show). To be more specific on the definition of the genre, Lawler recommends a definition that focuses on two aspects worthy of attention. The first is "the truism that in SF it is the science that makes possible the experience of the characters" (Lawler 1978: 19). The second aspect emphasizes on the effect SF is supposed to produce on readers. In relation to the second aspect Lawler offers this definition:

Science fiction is the literature that extrapolates from, speculates about, or depicts the effects of science, technology, or natural forces on human or other sentient creatures so as to produce a sense of imagined awe or wonder in readers. (19)

Lawler further explains that writers choose to write SF because it enables them to deal with probabilities beyond the natural or the conventional to stimulate imagined emotions, also known as secondary emotions, produced by works of art such as SF. Though imagined or secondary, the emotions are far from being unreal. They are known human emotions such as awe and wonder along with love, fear, hate or pity. Therefore Lawler says that the first intention of a SF critic should be to determine the potential of a SF text in producing these emotions or experience in readers.

Thus, with scientific and technological change as the main trope, common traits in the definitions of this genre are fictions that have any of the following as the subject, themes, trappings or prop:

☐   Spaceships, interplanetary or interstellar travel;

☐   Aliens and the encounter with aliens;

☐ Mechanical robots,   genetic   engineering, robots

☐ Computers, advanced technology, virtual reality;
☐ Time travel;
☐ Alternative history;
☐ Futuristic utopias and dystopias. (Roberts 2000:14-

Though common images such as aliens or advanced technology are still crucial elements in SF, the   concern now is not just looking at "the impact of science and technology on humanity", it is also on "improving the human condition" (Landon 2002:175). In other words, SF also provides a possibility for a sociological study of futuristic societies. The SF works that allow readers to probe further into the human condition are known as soft SF or soft agenda SF.

READING THE GENRE

As reflected in the common trappings and tropes of SF, reading the genre involves a process of interpreting a rather large amount of special contexts. These contexts consist of worlds and characters that are different from what readers of other genres are used to as SF "distinguishes its fictional worlds to one degree or another from the world in which we actually live: a fiction of the imagination rather than observed reality…" (Roberts 2000:1). Therefore, readers have to infer mostly from the text when making interpretations of what the world and characters may be like as both the author and reader are imagining the portrayed contexts, bearing in mind some of the portrayal will probably never exist. Hence, the most important for the readers of SF is to have "a willing suspension of disbelief and a questioning mind" (Herald 1995: 208).

In fact, Landon (2002) argues that reading SF requires a kind of difference, separate from the usual norm of literariness. He says:

The difference can be so pronounced that it may be useful to think of SF as a language that must be learned or as a mode of writing as distinctive as poetry, complete with its reading protocols quite different from those used for reading other kinds of fiction.

In view of this, it is the contention of this paper to utilise certain principles of practical criticism - a method developed by Richards in the earlier half of the 20th century to provide an objective, systematic and scientific way of reading poetry – to the reading and interpreting of SF worlds and characters.

The methods of practical criticism have, since first experimented on, been developed and made more accessible to students of literature. For example, when looking into a poem, readers are usually expected to get a general idea of the poem first. Then the reading will involve a more detailed examination of choice of words, phrases, figurative language, repetitions and rhythm used

in the poem in order to look for irregularities, contrasts or tensions that would help express the poet‟s intentions. At the end of it, it is anticipated that the reading, based on the organised method, will be an informed one where the intended sense of the poem is achieved by the readers. Similarly, to get the sense and meaning conveyed in SF, readers can examine the choice of metaphors, tropes, irregularities, contrast or tensions to help perceive the imagined worlds and characters without getting too apprehensive over the aliens or the scientific and technological trappings.

Following this, it is almost expected that the first characters and worlds to be investigated in a paper that discusses SF are those which involve aliens or alien forms. According to Herald (1995), the use of aliens offers writers of SF limitless possibilities. The first contact with humans may be antagonistic or forthcoming. They may be earth invaders or saviours. They may be bug-eyed monsters, or humanoids, or reptilians or even plant-like. However, unbelievable or awe-inspiring as these aliens may be, inevitably, according to Parrinder "aliens in SF invariably possess a metaphorical dimension" (1979: 155). And to an informed reader, some if not all of the intended metaphorical dimension of aliens will be made obvious. Parrinder (1979) further explains the metaphorical facets of aliens using Richards‟ terms, "tenor" and "vehicle". He says the tenor of the metaphor is any human behaviour or human culture that is defamiliarised, exaggerated or revealed as unnecessary or ideological by the writer. Defamiliarisation, a term coined by the Russian Formalist in the 20th century means to "render the familiar unfamiliar" for the purpose of setting "the mind in a state of radical unpreparedness", to put into question "the conventionality of our perceptions" so that "we see the world afresh" (Wall, 2009:20-21). The vehicle, on the other hand, is any identifiable variation of the human norm. The variation may include features of the natural world (such as animals or plants), the mythical world (such as giants or dwarfs), or those considered as "the other" in the culture of the writer or the intended reader. The metaphorical dimension can be demonstrated through Resnick‟s (2003) short story *The Elephants on Neptune*.

As the title hints, the aliens (from a reader‟s perspective) in *The Elephants on Neptune* are elephants. The story is a satire that portrays a meeting between the elephants and men from Earth. The human behaviour, specifically the treatment towards elephants throughout recorded history, revealed to readers through this meeting is unsettling and alarming. It is this human behaviour, defamiliarised or distanced, that is the tenor in this metaphorical dimension. Consider the following extract which portrays the elephants‟ recollection of history on Earth:***217 b.c.***

The first clash between the two species of elephants. Ptolemy IV took his African elephants

against Antiochus the Great's Indian elephants

The elephants on Neptune weren't sure who won the war, but they knew

who lost. Not a single elephant on either side survived.

Later that same 217 b.c.

While Ptolemy was battling in Syria, Hannibal took thirty-seven elephants

over the Alps to fight the Romans. Fourteen of them froze to death, but the rest lived just long

enough to absorb the enemy's spear thrusts while Hannibal was winning the Battle of Cannae.

(Resnick 2003:152-53)

From the extract, it is discernible that the tenor or sense in this metaphorical dimension reveals the unnecessary human cruelty and willingness to sacrifice others in the pursuit of power and glory. Compare this with the elephants‟ extreme sensitivity towards the notion of cruelty:

"We have important things to talk about," said the men. "For example, Neptune's atmosphere is singularly lacking in oxygen. How do you breathe?"

"Through our noses," said the elephants.

"That was a serious question," said the men, fingering their weapons ominously.

"We are incapable of being anything but serious," explained the elephants. "Humour requires that someone be the butt of the joke, and we find that too cruel to contemplate." (153)

Through the talking elephants, Resnick defamiliarizes human behaviour so that readers are able to get the intended message by the "distance" that is created. In addition, his sardonic and cynical tone also helps intensify the need to reflect on human behaviour especially in relation to the ideology of colonisation. This is reflected in the first words uttered by the men as soon as landing on Neptune despite the obvious presence of local inhabitants (reminiscent of the British landing in Australia), "We claim this planet in the name of the United Federation of Earth" (152).

Another SF writer, Michael Swanwick (1999), also uses metaphors in his short story *The Dead* to deal with human behaviour. He projects a future where humans attempt to make profit through an alternative labour force labelled "Postanthropic Biological Resources" (Swanwick 1999: 131). In this short story, Koestler Biological successfully experiments with the dead to provide cost-effective workforce for companies or factories to multiply production. In effect, these companies will have zombies working for them. The logic of it is argued as such:

"Look at it from the viewpoint of a typical factory owner. He's already downsized to the bone and labor costs are bleeding him dry. How can he compete in a dwindling consumer market? Now let's imagine he buys into the program… No benefits, No liability suits. No sick pay. No pilferage. We're talking about cutting labor costs by at least two thirds. Minimum! That's irresistible, I don't care how big your revulsion factor is. We project we can move five hundred thousand units in the first year."

*"Five hundred thousand," I said. "That's crazy. Where the hell
are you going to get the raw material for -?" "Africa." (132)*

The protagonist, Donald (also the narrator), is headhunted for the job of marketing the „new product". In a capitalist and extremely competitive setting, this is a deal not to be missed but he struggles with the revelation. After watching an underground wrestling match in Manhattan

between a man and a zombie, Donald was drawn deeper into a conflict within himself. The idea of using the dead to gain multiple profits is repulsive and the implications daunting, yet at the same time Donald knows the inevitability of the impending new reality.

...I could only imagine what is must be like for a man who had always lived by his strength and his ability to absorb punishment to realize that he was facing an opponent to whom pain meant nothing… Despite his best blows, the zombie stayed methodical, serene, calm, relentless… He must have known early on that it was hopeless, that he wasn't going to win, but he'd refused to take the fall. He had to be pounded into the ground. He went down raging, proud and uncomplaining. I had to admire that.

But he lost anyway.

That, I realized was the message I was meant to take away from this. Not just that the product was robust. But that only those who backed it were going to win. I could see, even if the audience couldn't, that it was the end of an era. A man's body wasn't worth a damn anymore. There wasn't anything it could do that technology couldn't handle better. The number of losers in the world had just doubled, tripled, reached maximum. What the fools below were cheering for was the death of their futures. I got up and cheered too. (135-36)

It is clear in this story that Swanwick is observing and responding to the social and economic changes occurring in the late 20th century, especially that of a capitalist society. It is through the observation that the future is anticipated and the consequences projected. Of this story, Swanwick writes, "There‟s very little I can say about this story. I wrote it at a time when corporations were responding to record profits by firing thousands of their employees, and I wrote it in anger" (141). The new society appears bleak and unfeeling as projected through the zombies, who are physically alive but spiritually dead. Clearly, the zombies are not merely minor characters in this short story. They in fact offer a metaphorical dimension, representing Swanwick‟s sense and intention - that the new society is almost totally void of spirituality and humanity. However, the human wrestler‟s

tenacity and unwillingness to just surrender without a fight offers a kind of irregularity to the tone of the short story, signifying that not all is lost – that perhaps there is hope for humankind.

China Mieville‟s (2000) novel *Perdido Street Station* portrays even more strange characters for readers to make sense of. Besides humans, the novel contains a wide array of "xenians" – humanoids that could be part insect, part cactus, part bird or part machine - all co-existing in various parts of a sprawling city called New Crobuzon. How these creatures came to be is never explained by Mieville, it is simply the way of New Crobuzon. Humans are the dominant species and most xenians live in the ghetto, although to a certain extent all the species live, work and interact socially with each other. Interestingly, even amidst the strange array of creatures, the city life is not that unfamiliar. The world presented to readers, is full of corrupt officials as well as social inequality and prejudices. It is taboo, for example, for a man to have a relationship with a khepri (a xenian insect). The sense projected by Mieville via the characters, though strange, is literal and straightforward. What is of interest is Mieville‟s craft in creating the characters and what they disclose about the world of New Crobuzon reveals his true intention of defamiliarising human nature.

For example, a „remade‟ is a bio-engineered human or xenian upon whom are oddly attached any number of animal or mechanical parts to serve a particular purpose. A remade bodyguard may have extra weaponry built in to make a more efficient protector. Indeed robotics is no longer strange even to our current technology. However, remaking may also serve as a punitive function and this is where readers would be awed and surprised by the grotesqueness of the concept:

Isaac quietly greeted the old man by the door, Joshua, whose Remaking had been very small and very cruel. A failed burglar, he had refused to testify against his gang and the magister had ordered his silence made permanent: he had his mouth taken away, sealed with a seamless stretch of flesh. Rather than live on tubes of soup pushed through his nose, Joshua had sliced himself a

new mouth, but the pain had made him tremble, and it was a ragged, torn, unfinished-looking thing, a flaccid wound. (Mieville 2000:23)

Another character punished for her mistakes also reveals to readers the grotesqueness yet creativity of remaking:

Some woman living at the top of one of the Ketch Heath monoliths killed her baby…smothered it or shook it or Jabber knows what…because it wouldn't stop crying…she can't believe what's happened, she keeps moaning her baby's name, and the Magister sentences. Prison, of course, ten years…but it was the Remaking that I remember.

"Her baby's arms are going to be grafted to her face. So she doesn't forget what she did" he says. (81-82)

In fact Mieville shows readers that even the other citizens of New Crobuzon struggle with the harshness of remaking:

Standing before Lin was a vast Remade. Her face was still the same mournful, pretty human woman's it had always been, with dark skin and long plaited hair, but it supplanted a seven-foot skeleton of black iron and pewter. She stood on a tripod of stiff telescoping metal. Her body had been altered for heavy labour, with pistons and pulleys giving her what looked like ineluctable strength. Her right arm was levelled at Lin's head and from the centre of the brass hand extended a vicious harpoon.

Lin recoiled in astonished terror. (30)

Though designed for hard labour, when readers are introduced to the remade in the extract above, she is a receptionist to Mr Motley, a wealthy hybrid. The contrast between her appearance and her occupation reminds readers of how to some the past is fluid while to others it is permanent and imprisoning. More importantly, the remaking technology also highlights the dangers when subjective „creativity" is allowed into the judicial and economic spheres.

Another character/species is Mr Motley, who is a reclusive hybrid. It was never revealed how he came to be, but being New Crobuzon"s most powerful gangster allows him to enjoy a life of

dominance over others and with his position of power he has the luxury to celebrate his hybridity. He commissions Lin, a khepri, xenian insect artist to produce his sculpture – typical of those in power longing to be immortalised. However, sculpting Mr Motley proves to be a difficult task as Lin discovered upon her first meeting with her subject, whose

[s]craps of skin and fur and feathers swung as he moved; tiny limbs clutched; eyes rolled from obscure niches; antlers and protrusions of bone jutted precariously; feelers twitched and mouths glistened. Many-coloured skeins of skin collided. A cloven hoof thumped gently against the wood floor. Tides of flesh washed against each other in violent currents. Muscles tethered by alien tendons to alien bones worked together in uneasy truce, in slow, tense motion. Scales gleamed. Fins quivered. Wings fluttered brokenly. Insect claws folded and unfolded. (38)

Behind the grotesque, the whole presence of Mr Motley is painfully poetic. He is the embodiment of almost all known beings yet it gives a sense that when he was created everything had gone wrong. With this creature, Mieville allows a vast space for readers to roam, speculate and wonder. Although the physique of Mr Motley consists of an immense amount of detail and combinations just as his name suggests, much is left unexplained. Mieville has, undoubtedly, created a metaphorical wonder with Mr Motley. Just as we are awed by size, scope or magnitude of an object, we can also be awed by something we cannot comprehend or grasp.

The world and characters articulated on the pages of *Perdido Street Station* is very much like ours. It has both beauty and horror. And like cities as we know it, New Crobuzon offers endless possibilities for its inhabitants. Yet at the same time, the culture of the city with its competitiveness and modernity traps them. What this author has done is to defamiliarise and distance a city-state through creativity and exaggerations so that readers can ironically bring it closer to heart. It is a kind of warning as to what existing city-states may come to be. And if it is

awe and wonder that SF is supposed to create, the world and characters in this novel have indeed succeeded.

Apart from looking at metaphors and irregularities, examining conflicts or tensions in a SF world may also provide sense and meaning for readers. Ted Chiang"s novella *Liking What You See: A Documentary* is clearly set in this world, but presents a different way of thinking which makes the familiar perception of beauty seem awkward. The story centres on Tamara Lyons who, at eighteen, chooses to stop using calliagnosia, or calli, in order to learn more and see more of the world around her. It also transcribes the varying viewpoints of several other characters. Calli, the technology developed to allow people to see what other people look like without making judgments based on appearance becomes an issue when several parties vote to make it compulsory to create a non-prejudiced society- *Joseph Weingartner, neurologist:*

The condition is what we call an associative agnosia, rather than an apperceptive one. That means it doesn't interfere with one's visual perception, only with the ability to recognize what one sees. A calliagnosic perceives faces fairly well; he or she can tell the difference between a pointed chin and a receding one, a straight nose and a crooked one, clear skin and blemished skin. He or she simply doesn't experience any aesthetic reaction to those differences. (Chiang 2002:283)

While calli may be fictional, the issue that Chiang addresses is clearly not:

Maria deSouza, third-year student, President of the Students for Equality Everywhere (SEE):

…The deeper societal problem is lookism. For decades people've been willing to talk about racism and sexism, but they're still reluctant to talk about lookism. Yet this prejudice against unattractive people is incredibly pervasive. People do it without even being taught by anyone…Educating people, raising their awareness about this issue…it's not enough. That's

where technology comes in… Think of calliagnosia as a kind of assisted maturity. (282)

The writer takes the simple concept of beauty and makes it an issue to contend with. As the extract above demonstrates, it is a prejudice that has been neglected. Chiang takes what is usually considered normal and makes it conditional and problematic hence debatable:

Anika Lindstrom, second-year student:

I think this calli thing is a terrible idea. I like it when guys notice me, and

I'd be really disappointed if they stopped.

I think this whole things is just a way for people who, honestly aren't very good-looking, to try and make themselves feel better. And the only way they can do that is to punish people who have what they don't. And that's just unfair. (299)

Chiang may appear to be preachy at times but his story tells readers that if we were to learn anything about humankind it is in this world, not in any other strange, futuristic ones or those on other planets. His world is typically American but the issue is not limited to America. He shows clearly the condition of society and sees how individuals may fair in this society faced with a seemingly minute but delicate problem. As readers, we see that although specifically Chiang is dealing with the question of beauty and how humans perceive and react to it, he tackles much pertinent issues of individual freedom as well as the need for equal treatment. Therefore, in order to achieve sense and meaning in this story, identifying the tension is of utmost significance. It is not the technology or the action that gives meaning to this SF text.

CONCLUSION

To some SF critics, shared jargons and shared visions of worlds and characters in SF are vital in understanding the genre as a whole, to an extent that it becomes exclusive. These critics believe that to be able to enjoy this genre, readers need to have a working grasp of the tropes and

trappings of SF. Undeniably, understanding what is signified in SF is vital in getting the sense and meaning. However, just as the methods of Practical Criticism have helped make poetry less exclusive and more accessible, there is no reason why the same methods cannot make SF more inclusive. Whatever the themes, be it "spacecraft and star drives; exploration and colonies; biologies and environments; warfare and weaponry; galactic empires; future and alternative histories; utopias and nightmares; cataclysms and dooms; lost and parallel worlds; time and nth dimensions; technologies and artifacts; cities and cultures; robots and androids; computers and cybernetics; mutants and symbiotes…" (Herald 1995:244), readers only need a critical mind to be stimulated. Undoubtedly, for some readers, SF is indeed a literature of scientific ideas and speculations. But for other readers, behind the scientific trappings, SF is clearly a medium for social commentary or a mode of social critique. And for others still, SF offers a kind of adventure.

Therefore, it does not really matter if a reader does not completely understand the scientific or technological workings of a particular SF trope or archetype, what matters is the sense and meaning that is captured by each reader. And readers will get this from the writer"s craftsmanship - his choice of words, images, figurative language, repetitions and tone used, in order to establish irregularities, contrasts or tensions as the worlds and characters are presented on the pages. According to Richards "we speak to say something…We use words to direct our hearers" attention upon some state of affairs, to present to them some items for consideration and to excite in them some thoughts about these items" (1929:175). If these words were applied to the reading of the genre at hand, as such reading SF may be a less daunting exercise. And it would prove to be a useless exercise to deem certain readings of SF as inaccurate or valueless.

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