correspondents abroad

# Researching and Teaching Science Fiction in Greece

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IN *THE DREAMS OUR STUFF IS MADE OF,* THOMAS M. DISCH TALKS ABOUT THE INFLUENCE AND PERVASIVENESS OF SCIENCE FICtion in American culture and asserts the genre's power in "such diverse realms as industrial design and marketing, military strategy, sexual mores, foreign policy, and practical epistemology" (11–12). A few years earlier, Sharona Ben-Tov described science fiction as "a peculiarly American dream"—that is, "a dream upon which, as a nation, we act" (2). Recently, Kim Stanley Robinson has claimed that "rapid technological development on all fronts combined to turn our entire social reality into one giant science fiction novel, which we are all writing together in the great collaboration called history" (1–2). While such diagnostic statements may ring true to American ears, they cannot be taken at face value in the context of Hellenic culture. Despite the unprecedented speed with which the Greeks absorb and consume both the latest technologies (like satellite TV, video, CD and DVD players, electronic games, mobile and cordless phones, PCs, and the Internet)[1] and Hollywood's science fiction blockbuster films, neither technology per se nor science fiction has yet saturated the Greek mind-set to a degree that makes daily life a science-fictional reality. Greek politicians do not consult science fiction writers for military strategy and foreign policy decisions or depend on imaginary scenarios to shape their country's future. Contemporary Hellenic culture does not acquire its national pride from mechanical devices or space conquest. Contrary to the American popular belief that technology is the driving force of history, "a virtually autonomous agent of change" (Marx and Smith xi), the Greek view is that a complex interplay of political, economic, cultural, and technoscientific agencies alters the circumstances of daily life. No hostages to technological determinism, modern Greeks increasingly interface with high-tech inventions, but without locating earthly paradise in their geographic territory and without writing their history or shaping their social reality as "one giant science fiction novel."

Although Hellas boasts an illustrious tradition of ancient science and technology[2]—an excellent record in astronomy (Aristarchus and his heliocentric theory), in mathematics (Pythagoras), in mechanical inven-

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tion (Philon, Heron), in engineering and military technology (Archimedes), in telegraphy (Aeneas Tacticus), in communication (Polybius's semaphore), in computers (the Antikythera mechanism), in music (the water organ), in human anatomy (Herophilus, Erasistratus), in medicine (Hippocrates)—this tradition has been rendered invisible and mute by the claim that real science and technology begin with the Industrial Revolution. Although modern Greeks are familiar with the ancient myths referring to the flying feat of Icarus and Daedalus, to the technological wonders of Hephaistos, and to the first robot (Talos), they are in many respects ignorant of their technological and scientific legacy and more aware of their cultural heights in literature and the arts. Modern Hellenic culture remains deeply rooted in a diachronic historical and literary context and thus places more emphasis on the old and the durable than on the new and the ephemeral, as well as more on the fantastic than on the technological. Despite the recent intrusion of the American lifestyle in the forms of consumer goods and of mass media that promote a society of the spectacle (private commercial television was launched in 1989), Greeks have not adopted wholesale the view that technology defines the real world and are not rushing to embrace a future already described in some futuristic novel or film. In other words, Greeks do not depend on science fiction to form a basic sense of what is real and what is not.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, the nation-state of Greece embraced the space projects of the European Space Agency, took pride in the presence of a Georgian cosmonaut of Greek origin (Fyodor Nikolayevich Yurchikhin) on the space shuttle *Atlantis*,[3] and made much of the launching of its own communications satellite, *Hellas-Sat*. In 2003 there were 8.6 million active mobile-phone users in Greece—78% of the total population (Mamouris), although only 27% of Greeks fifteen and older admitted using a personal computer in the same year (Tsiros). Hellas on Line began operating in early 1994. Currently, twenty local companies provide round-the-clock Web and e-mail services. Estimates put the number of regular Internet users at about 1.5 million and occasional users at about 1.2 million; this accounts only for 10%–12% of the population, said to be predominantly highly educated, middle- and upper-class people over thirty. Greece ranks last in Internet use among the fifteen nations of the European Union, where the average rate is 36% (Nikolaidis). The proliferation of Internet cafés and the rising profits of companies that supply computers are not indications of Greece's takeover by the information mania or the desert of the real. It is a sad realization that most Greeks are at best indifferent to the political motives behind the rapid scientific and technological advances and at worst ignorant of the long-term social consequences of those advances. The reasons for this indifference are many, but a major contributor is the lack of interest in reading.[4] Of the Greeks that read, the overwhelming majority consumes mainly literature by mainstream Greek or foreign writers.

Science fiction remains in a ghetto creatively and critically. It is not and has never been a favorite recreational pastime of the Greek public. It has gained more fans in the last two decades, but they are too few to have any impact on the general publishing attitude. Commercial interests and priorities have discouraged the efforts of Greek writers who have tried their skills in science fiction. Only a handful can boast an opus of several texts; the rest have written from one to three novels, a couple of short story collections, or a few stories in various magazines and local fanzines. None make a living by writing science fiction. Any aspirations of having a professional career in this genre are premature. But a host of Greek female writers of children's and young adult literature occasionally produce science fiction works that have an optimistic outlook. Finally, there is no such thing as Greek feminist science fiction.

From the 1970s on, Greek publishers have supplied the local book market with translated

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science fiction texts of well-known foreign writers, mostly Anglo-American men. Sales have been moderate. The books are usually issued in print runs of one to two thousand, and they often pass quickly out of print and out of sight. Another factor limiting the sales of science fiction written in Greek or translated into Greek is the good knowledge of English by the younger generation. Many young Greeks prefer to read anglophone authors in the original and thus prefer to buy the imported book rather than wait for the Greek translation. High sales of fantastic literature in general are contingent on the opening of blockbuster movies. Greek publishers take advantage of the commercial opportunities created by Hollywood, as their recent publication of Tolkien's texts, the Harry Potter novels, and Philip K. Dick's works attests.

That the national climate for science fiction steadily improved in the 1990s is evident not only in the increase of translated novels, collections, and anthologies and in the permanent presence of science fiction films on Greek television channels but also in the interest of several mainstream literary magazines, which have occasionally published, as a separate section, essays discussing this type of literature. The greatest impact has been made by the major Panhellenic newspaper Ελευθεροτυπία (*Free Press*), which publishes a translated science fiction story in each issue of its magazine Εννέα, offered free every Wednesday with the day's paper.

In Greek academia, science fiction is nearly invisible. A course on the subject is part of the curriculum and counts toward the bachelor's degree only in the Department of American Literature and Culture of the School of English at Aristotle University of Thessaloníki. On my return from the United States in 1991, I decided to teach this course, in anglophone science fiction, to initiate Greek students to the genre. The course has been offered every winter semester to fourth-year students who major in English. Because of the large number of students (100–20 per class), universal participation in class discussions is hindered. The nonobligatory attendance policy of the Greek university creates an inconstant student audience. Nonetheless, seventy to eighty students attend regularly, and a good percentage contributes comments. Because Greece shares both the effects of major technological and scientific projects (space flight, telecommunications, computers, the Internet, robotics, genetics, new reproductive and medical technologies) and the philosophical perspective of Western science and technology, the aim of the course is twofold: to understand science fiction as a distinct literary genre and as a springboard for probing the social, cultural, political, economic, and ethical consequences of the Western technoscientific world system and to explore the insights science fiction can offer when it is approached as a forum of political and ideological debate. What can English-language science fiction offer to Greek students? Besides helping them to consider the fate of humanity on the planet and perhaps allowing them to identify with human dreams, desires, and longings worldwide, foreign science fiction texts make it clear that technologies invented in other countries carry with them a specific ideological substratum, which the authors exploit in their imaginary scenarios. When we consider the application of advanced technologies (e.g., cloning, cryonics, nanotechnology, digitalization of life) nationally, cultural differences in the ideological justifications for adopting them become apparent. It may be self-evident to Americans that technological progress is as American as apple pie and thus the determiner of their national course toward a technologically dominated future, but other nationals, whose countries are not a technological paradise and whose social priorities are different, are not always inspired by visions of a global future made in the USA.

Because the overwhelming majority of my students are female and have little or no contact with science fiction and because most of them are ignorant of current technoscientific developments, exposing them to "hard" science fiction

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novels and short stories is an ideal way to make them think about the impact of high tech on personal, national, and global levels. I approach science fiction with a focus on social and political concerns enhanced by a feminist perspective. After a couple of introductory lectures about the origins, the historical development, and the various stages of American science fiction, I ask students to scrutinize the underlying ideology of its imaginary societies, to compare the futuristic visions of male authors with those of female authors, to detect the politics related to specific issues (e.g., space conquest, the human-machine interface, the promotion of a high-tech lifestyle, computer and cyborg culture), and to develop a personal position on current scientific advances and technological products and services. Because the emphasis is on the relation among technoscience, literature, and daily life, the analysis of specific texts is preceded by a good dose of nonfictional information. I provide students with a packet of excerpts from recent scientific books as well as newspaper and magazine articles on related issues. Students also view in class documentary videos on specific technologies and television programs in which leading scientists and other experts express their views on hot current debates. Nonfictional materials written by scientists, scholars, and specialized journalists are placed on reserve for those who desire a deeper understanding of a controversy. Often pages from the Internet provide testimony to the commercial exploitation of a technology.

Most European scholars teaching and researching science fiction come from English or American studies departments and thus have a great command of the anglophone scene but little knowledge of their national science fiction output. My job requires me to make English-language science fiction my first priority, but at the same time I try to study and write about Hellenic science fiction.[5] The science fiction community of the global village has a great need of the voices of writers from countries in which languages other than English are spoken. For their distinct cultural perspectives to be revealed, we need both good translations of foreign writers in English (despite the threat of cultural imperialism, English is the global language of our day) and scholarly works by academics about local production. If science fiction is to have a truly international dimension, it must be able to communicate the diverse visions of the people on the planet Earth in a language accessible to millions. We need major studies that illuminate our ignorance of the science fiction traditions of countries whose production has been invisible and silent because of the language barrier. The tree of science fiction has many branches, but up to now only those branches that have enjoyed their day in the sun have been able to display their fertility; it is time for the other, equally creative branches to enter the scene and be recognized.

## Notes

[1] A recent report estimates that 99% of Greek households own a TV set and 80% a videocassette recorder (Halvatzakis). The sales of DVDs have been steadily rising the last few years. The number of DVDs purchased in 2003 is estimated to be 239,000. The gradual shift from videocassette to DVD is also evident in the rental preferences of Greeks; whereas in 2002 the overwhelming majority of film rentals (80%) were of videocassettes, in 2003 DVD film rentals rose to 40% (Tsoli and Rozakos). However, the local cable and satellite TV supplier Nova has been unable to attract more than 1.4% of Greek households. In 2001 Greece had the highest average TV viewing time in the European Union (243 minutes daily). During the 2002–03 television season, the viewing average was estimated at about four hours daily. Despite their addiction to the small screen, Greeks are not avid consumers of televised science fiction films or science fiction TV series. The most popular shows are reality games, Greek serials, soap operas, and sports broadcasts. A high percentage of computer users (41% in 2001) are young persons of ages fifteen to twenty-four (Tsiros). They are the ones who also surf the Internet and play video games. Book sales indicate that this group prefers to read fantasy rather than science fiction novels.

[2] The ancient Greek world had a series of inventions: all sorts of automata, elaborate water clocks, solar mirrors,

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surgical instruments, war machines, the sundial, the oil press, the hydraulic telegraph, and so on. The first flying machine (πετομηχανή) in the world was invented by Archytas of Tarantine. For more information on Greek inventions, see James and Thorpe; Lazos.

[3] In October 2002, while in space, the cosmonaut communicated with his Greek mother, Eleni Grammatikopoulou, and his father, Nikolas Yurchikhin, who for the past ten years had resided in a small town near Thessaloníki. His later visit to his parents was widely covered by the Greek mass media.

[4] A recent study by the National Book Center of Greece reports that about 60% of Greeks have not read a single book (Melikis).

[5] For information about Greek science fiction, see my "Hellenic Magazines," "Space Flight," "News," "SF," "Science Fiction in Greece," and "Hellenic Science Fiction" and reviews of two novels by Greek writers: Αιωρούμενη πραγματικότητα, by Alexia Athanasiou, and Προληπτικός πυρηνικός πόλεμος: Το όραμα του αιδεσιμότατου, by Yiannis Vatzias.

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