correspondents abroad

Circumstances and Stances

DARKO SUVIN

THE "PARTICULAR CULTURAL AND POLITICAL CIRCUMSTANCES IN WHICH I WRITE" HAVE CHANGED DECISIVELY SEVERAL TIMES in my life.[1] I have been several times an expatriate and finally an émigré from Yugoslavia, and I am now an expatriate from Canada—a life that has made me very attuned to global material and moral changes. I shall focus on the changes that I personally felt as inciding deeply into my professional work in the last ten years or so, the watershed for me being the illegal and immoral bombing of Serbia led by the United States. By then I had published three books on science fiction—*Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979), *Victorian Science Fiction in the U.K.* (1983), and *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction* (1988)—and written enough further essays for a fourth book, which was scrapped when the Liverpool University Press had its budget cut. The changes make me, alas, the bearer of bad news, for as I see it our rulers have in practice destroyed the wall that our disciplines wrongly thought existed between culture and political economics, and we had better draw the consequences. And yet the gesture and bearing (see Suvin, "*Haltung*") of writing this report also imply a hope that with much clarity, work, and luck we intellectuals—writers and then critics—can make an important difference.

[I]

In this world of late aggressive capitalism without a human face, what we are allowed or denied to teach by its politicians and managers, what monies we are given or refused for research, intervenes into our daily lives in unprecedented, capillary ways. A primary factor shaping our situation is the bending of all technological and other cultural innovations to the purposes of capitalism as a totalizing system. Two-thirds of the gross national product in the societies of the capitalist North today derives from the mental labor of the new middle classes, whose core is composed of intellectuals. Richard Ohmann's classic book about the role of English in America notes, "Knowledge (technical, scientific, managerial) is accountable, not only for the material triumphs of [the

DARKO SUVIN, born in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, has taught in Yugoslavia, the United States, and Canada and is now professor emeritus at McGill University and a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, retired to Italy. He was coeditor of *Science Fiction Studies* during 1973–81 and has written twelve books, including two books of poetry, as well as many articles. His latest writings on science fiction and utopianism appear in *Envisioning the Future: Science Fiction and the Next Millennium* (Wesleyan UP, 2003) and *SFRA Review* 266 (2003) and 267 (2004).

© 2004 BY THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X20622 Published online by Cambridge University Press

capitalist] system, but for the all-encompassing control it has over the way we live" (273). Through copyright and patent legislation, often through piratical plunder of nonpatented knowledge, mental labor is being more and more subsumed under exploitable property. We live in a knowledge society: alas, one in which useful knowledge and perniciously fake knowledge are closely intertwined. Knowledge as use value for living is being evicted by knowledge as exchange value for profits, with its logical end in "smart bombs" for mass killings.

What, then, is knowledge? And what is the function of us intellectuals as bearers of knowledge? As to the first question: the economic collapse of Fordism and the political collapse of Leninism plus Keynesianism have shaken our epistemology. A good part of what we thought we knew beyond a peradventure in (say) 1945–74 has turned out to be inaccurate. Some certainties have become thoroughly uncertain, and I do not see how we can now gauge the correctness of any replacing hypothesis without establishing first a great deal about how we know what we believe we know, about what is the *bon usage* of knowing and in knowing. There is no way around focusing on some knots in epistemology. I adopt the definition of epistemology as the theory of knowledge, dealing with the possibilities and limits of human knowledge, with the analysis of conceptual and other (e.g., affective) cognitive systems, and in particular with the critique of language and other sign systems as concrete consciousness.

For a starter: any epistemic tool of ours defines equally its object types and its subject wielders *as* something and *to* (*for*) something; its embodied adoption codefines our access to the world of signifying and significant potential actions. Any understanding intervenes into life to a certain degree—if only by refusing to intervene. In brief, it is imperative that we realize, as the feminists have, that epistemology does not function without our asking the political question "what for?" or *cui bono?* Interests and values decisively *shape* all perception: it was Marx's great insight that no theory or method can be understood without the practice of social groups to which it corresponds. Thus, our answers can be found only in feedback with potential action. As Vico argued, whatever we cannot intervene into, we cannot understand: it follows that *the epistemological and the political intertwine*. Those who do not put an explicitly defensible civic cognition at the heart of their professional cognition at best adopt the dominant epistemology of the time when they were students, and at worst adapt their cognition to the new epistemology of the Powers That Be.

I cannot here articulate properly an answer to the second question: our deeply contradictory situation as intellectuals, impacted like a split tooth. I have discussed this elsewhere ("Utopianism," "Novum," and "What May"), concluding that we are essential to the production of new knowledge but largely kept out of the strategic decision-making about our universities and about dissemination of our artifacts. Therefore, our civic concerns are not something we might hold, as it were, privately: indeed, we can only understand what our professional work may be if we understand how and why it is being shaped by identifiable national and international forces. The age of the Welfare and Warfare State saw the culmination of the cut from the global surplus we middle 10%–15%—"administrators, technicians, scientists, educators" (Wallerstein 83–84)—were getting; and "the shouts of triumph of this 'middle' sector over the reduction of their gap with the upper one per cent have masked the realities of the growing gap between them and the other [85%–90%]" (104–05). This trend is now being reversed. The class aggression by big corporations against the immediate producers, corporeal and intellectual, means that Jack London's dystopian division of workers under the "Iron Heel" into a minority of indispensable mercenaries and a mass of downtrodden proletarians (updated by Marge Piercy's science fiction novel *He, She, and It*) has a good

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X20622 Published online by Cambridge University Press

chance of being realized. The engineers of material and human resources, the admen and design professionals, the new bishops and cardinals of the media clerisy, most lawyers, as well as the teeming swarms of supervisors, are the Post-Fordist organic mercenaries.

This reminds me of an apocryphal anecdote. Shklovsky said to Trotsky, "As a literary critic, I'm not interested in war." Trotsky responded, "But war is interested in you."

We cannot escape being involved in the politics and economics of knowledge. Like Gulliver, in Laputa.

[II]

What does this sharp change of circumstances mean for me? I have two answers; one is spatial and existential, the other temporal and professional.

First, I chose to retire in 1999 and transferred back to Europe, not only my birthplace but—for all my admiration of many North American achievements and gratitude to Canada—my spiritual home. My move was also a political decision. Not only is it much easier to be a "senior citizen" where there are still chinks in consumer capitalism; it is also that, as Arnold Toynbee remarked half a century ago, "America is today the leader of a world-wide anti-revolutionary movement in defense of vested interests. She now stands for what Rome stood for. Rome consistently supported the rich against the poor in all foreign communities that fell under her sway . . ." (92–93). Paradoxically, I have to defend "America" (i.e., the United States known from the media and the military) from most of my European intellectual friends, who are thoroughly disgusted at the reigning discourse in it and at the actions the discourse seeks to justify; I try to point out that from Jefferson and Thoreau to the present day the best and strongest critiques of the United States came from inside: in science fiction, some examples are Thomas Disch's forgotten masterpiece *334* (which draws a parallel between the United States and the Late Roman Empire), and then the many splendid women writers from Joanna Russ and Ursula K. Le Guin on, and then the great dystopian tradition from the 1940s–50s "new maps of hell" on, and then . . . and then . . .

Finally, what do the new world circumstances mean for my work as a critic of science fiction? Criticism is for me still more of an art than anything else, and prescriptions ill fit a fast-evolving state of art. Thus, I may best answer the editor's question by giving examples of the shifts I found myself resorting to.[2] First, they include not writing only about fiction but also taking on with philological tools, according to one's competence and conscience (both of which can be trained), the Orwellian discourse about war, terrorism, immigrants, and similar issues—exactly what the MLA Delegate Assembly refused to discuss in 2002. This investigation further entails returning to our most kindred ancestral period, to my mind 1917–45, and writing about Benjamin's messianism, Brecht's combative hopes, as well as the role of German academics under Nazism. Second, when writing about science fiction and neighboring genres (such as the burgeoning fantasy genre of both the "heroic" and the "horror" varieties, overwhelmingly to my mind a bad involution that today dominates over science fiction on the library and bookstore shelves), I focused on the interaction of fictional scenarios and our pressing concerns. This work should not be taken for sociopolitical or philosophical criticism as extrinsic to literary or formal criticism but for an epistemological rethinking similar to what the best activist critics (liberals in the nineteenth century, socialists and feminists in the twentieth) have always done, yet striving for new epistemico-political tools to face new necessities. The tools have to be invented. I tried out one such method in revisiting the first and probably still the best science fiction dystopia, Yevgeny Zamyatin's *My* (*We*)—a method that I like to think mimics the DNA double helix: it braids alternate sections that look, on the one hand, at

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X20622 Published online by Cambridge University Press

how the text appears different after the fall of the centralized state Leviathan that was its raison d'être and, on the other hand, at the new Leviathan of capitalist immiseration and plunder of Russia in order to find out why our eyes have changed. The result is certainly preferable to formalism on its own (still the ABC of our wisdom) but possibly too mechanical to claim the status of a model. I attempted something similar in an essay about the discourse of cloning in science fiction and science. Third, in the discussions of utopianism, I concentrated either on its relation to action or on dystopia, the state we are living in and can therefore understand well; furthermore, I strove to differentiate within dystopia between what is and what is not antiutopian writing, explicitly designated to refute a literary and political utopian horizon (such as the gaggle of anti-Bellamy novels following on *Looking Backward* and similar manifestations from about 1917 on). Fourth, within science fiction I also investigated analogues to Benjamin, which can be found in many places, such as the later career of Philip K. Dick—its descent into total police-state dystopia (*A Scanner Darkly*) and its attempt to imagine salvation through a complex and in places ironic divine intervention (the VALIS cycle)—or the works of Kim Stanley Robinson, to my mind the best science fiction writer who has emerged from the 1990s.

Dixi et salvavi animam meam.

Notes

[1] The quoted phrase is from the editor's note inviting me to write these remarks.

[2] I will take the liberty of mentioning my essays "Considering," "Goodbye," "Reflections," "Science Fiction Parables," "Theses," and "With Sober, Estranging Eyes" for those who might want to look some of them up.

Works Cited

Ohmann, Richard. *English in America*. 1976. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1996.

Suvin, Darko. "Considering the Sense of 'Fantasy' or 'Fantastic Fiction.'" *Extrapolation* 41.3 (2000): 209–47.

———. "Goodbye and Hello: Differentiating within the Later P. K. Dick." *Extrapolation* 43.4 (2002): 368–97.

———. "*Haltung* (Bearing) and Emotions: Brecht's Refunctioning of Conservative Metaphors for Agency." *Zweifel—Fragen—Vorschläge*. Ed. T. Jung. Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1999. 43–58.

———. "Novum Is As Novum Does." *Science Fiction, Critical Frontiers*. Ed. K. Sayer and J. Moore. London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's, 2000. 3–22.

———. "Reflections on What Remains of Zamyatin's *We* after the Change of Leviathans: Must Collectivism Be against People?" *Envisioning the Future: Science Fiction and the Next Millennium*. Ed. Marleen Barr. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2003. 51–81.

———. "Science Fiction Parables of Mutation and Cloning as/and Cognition." *Biotechnological and Medical Themes in Science Fiction*. Ed. Domna Pastourmatzi. Thessaloníki: U Studio, 2002. 131–51.

———. "Theses on Dystopia." *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. Ed. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan. New York: Routledge, 2003.

———. "Utopianism from Orientation to Agency: What Are We Intellectuals under Post-Fordism to Do?" *Utopian Studies* 9.2 (1998): 162–90.

———. "What May the Twentieth Century Amount To: Initial Theses." *Critical Quarterly* [Oxford, UK] 44.2 (2002): 84–104.

———. "With Sober, Estranging Eyes." Afterword. *Learning from Other Worlds: Estrangement, Cognition, and the Politics of Science Fiction and Utopia*. Ed. Patrick Parrinder. Liverpool: Liverpool UP; Durham: Duke UP, 2000. 233–71.

Toynbee, Arnold. *"America and the World Revolution" and Other Lectures*. New York: Oxford UP, 1962.

Wallerstein, Immanuel. *Geopolitics and Geoculture*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X20622 Published online by Cambridge University Press