



FACULTY OF ARTS
OF CHARLES UNIVERSITY
IN PRAGUE



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

BA THESIS REPORT

Science fiction as social fiction: British sci-fi and its antecedents
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“The goal of this thesis,” according to the Abstract, “is to trace the roots of British science fiction literature and examine the evolution of the genre, noting the recurring themes, tropes and overall legacy of the canonical works of British sci-fi in contemporary literature.” In addition, the text “also contains an analysis of the specifically British nature, pessimistic and featuring passive characters, especially in comparison to the natural counterpart that is American SF, which shows more optimistic tone, empowered human characters” (Abstract).

The first of these objectives has been fairly successfully achieved: after a brief discussion of the definition of science fiction (SF), the thesis evolves into an encyclopedic survey of major texts that constitute the genre, from early novels such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* to the works of contemporary authors including Brian Aldiss, Gwyneth Jones, John Wyndham, Ken MacLeod and Adam Roberts. The second half then focuses on selected subgenres of SF, namely utopia/dystopia, time travel, alternate history, dying Earth and biopunk, listing exemplary works for each category. (“Hard SF vs Soft SF” and “Social SF,” which are introduced as separate subgenres here as well, do not seem to me to qualify as such: all the subgenres listed above may be both “hard” and “soft” and all are in their ways social. But the candidate points in the direction of this methodological problem herself).

The value of a brief informative survey is inevitably compromised by omissions and generalizations, two of which I would consider graver. First, it is argued that the “prototypical author [of British SF] would be a white educated male” (63) and therefore the “British literary SF scene [is] much more homogenous than its American counterpart” (63), but even a quick search would have yielded other female authors besides Mary Shelley and Gwyneth Jones: Katharine Burdekin, Doris Lessing, Naomi Mitchinson, Justina Robson, etc. Some of them could have been at least mentioned. Second, the incessant contrast of British and American SF (i.e. the second objective of the thesis) is equally schematic. Why are the two national traditions supposedly the most significant ones worldwide? We read that “[a]lthough science fiction has become established as a major subgenre in a considerable number of countries across the world by the 1950s, British and American environment allowed it to flourish the most. Hence these two countries have become traditionally connected to the genre, dominating over other branches, such as the French, Russian, German or indeed Czech” (9). What is the evidence here? Next, why is American SF a “natural counterpart” of British SF and why is the contrast so exaggerated? Throughout the thesis, American SF impersonates naiveté, shallow optimism and violence exemplified by the “traditionally American” (9) subgenre of the space opera which symbolically finds its apogee in “the right-wing politicization of the genre in the US” (59) during the Reagan era. On the other hand, British SF comes across as mature and thoughtful, as is apparent from claims such as: “The average British science fiction story is therefore a rather small-scale version of the American one,



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bursting with daring ambition, confidence and fervour” (10); “The brave, strong and often larger-than-life characters, embodying the heroic archetype too traditionally belong to the American science fiction brimming with action, while the more passive and rather ordinary characters reflect the more realistic approach of the atmosphere in British sci-fi circles” (11); “It is apparent that British science fiction continues to tackle serious political and social issues while enthusiastic and optimistic visions of the future are practically non-existent” (65), etc. Each of these arguments could be countered with examples that contradict it. Some of the very first space operas were British (e.g. Robert W. Cole’s *The Struggle for Empire: A Story of the Year 2236* from 1900). Utopia—which takes its name from the work of an English author—is not foreign to British science fiction and further utopias could have been mentioned (e.g. William Morris’s *News from Nowhere*). Many American SF authors indeed supported SDI but others did not (e.g. Isaac Asimov) and left-wing SF continues being written globally, the US notwithstanding. In any case, what is the point of literary nationalism at the time of immense cultural hybridity of SF on the one hand and national heterogeneity of “British” and “American” SF on the other?

Despite these shortcomings, the thesis is certainly acceptable as BA level work. It ventures into an interesting area and takes an appreciatively broad view. Good secondary material is referenced, including histories and theories of SF; much work has gone into researching the writing of individual authors. In addition, the text is on the whole well-edited and proofread; there are only a few typos and minor errors that I’ve noticed, e.g. “satire in in disguise” → “satire in disguise” (20); “make the reader belief” → “make the reader believe” (24); “*The Shape of the Things to Come*” → “*The Shape of Things to Come*” (27).

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June 6, 2017

Proposed grade: very good (2)