

NOT PREDICTION, BUT PREDICATION: THE TRUE POWER OF SCIENCE FICTION

It has become a cliché: the popular idea that science fiction authors predict the future, divining the next decade or generation's technologies in advance of their discovery, reading the state of 2100 or 3100 from the guts of the present.

These discussions inevitably degrade into arguments over what William Gibson did or did not get right about cyberspace, or how Isaac Asimov somehow “failed,” in his Foundation series, to predict the internet. Lately, given the global specters of rising autocracy and reactionary populism, discussions abound about what Orwell foresaw in *1984* about the present political state of the world, and what he “missed.”

What these articles misinterpret about science fiction is subtle, but vitally important. It is the fact that “prediction,” while it does exist within science fiction—as a narrow band of technological prognostication like a streak of quartz within the genre's rich strata—is not the central activity of the genre. It never has been, despite a few celebrity authors' occasional side gigs as “futurists” and talking heads on what the coming decades may hold.

In fact, if we were to shrink science fiction down to the narrow band of prediction there wouldn't be much left of the genre at all. *Slaughterhouse Five* would disappear, as would J.G. Ballard's *Crash*. Ray Bradbury's wonderful *The Martian Chronicles* would be gone. As would, most certainly, H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. Most of Ursula K. Le Guin's work would be gone. And we would lose countless others—N.K. Jemisin? Connie Willis? Octavia E. Butler? James Tiptree, Jr? These are wounds it would be hard for the genre to bear.

Science fiction would even lose much of the work of the authors thought of as central to the most conservative ideas of a science fiction “canon.” Asimov's disturbing thought experiment “Nightfall” would be gone, to give just one example. Asimov was an inveterate prognosticator, but most of his considerable output does not read as a serious prediction of some actual future. When you start thinking of it, science fiction would lose almost everything of itself if it were limited to prediction alone. So why this popular focus on that almost incidental element, that narrow band?

It think the main cause of the popular misunderstanding is that much of the time, science fiction authors are doing something that looks a lot *like* prediction, although it fundamentally is not: We are not predicting—we are *predicating*.

That one letter, that “a” in the third syllable, is easy to miss, but it makes all the difference. What SF authors are involved in is not divination, but a more productive type of thought experiment—asking detailed “what-if” questions and then predicating their stories on the idea that those creative “what-ifs?” are, in fact, true.

Some of these “what-if” questions may have to do with science and/or technology—but many do not. Some of these predications will even come true in the real world—and when they do, they end up looking a good deal like predictions. (Nobody mention *The Handmaid's Tale*, please.) But that still doesn't add up to prediction being central to science fiction.

A great example of the power of *predication*, on the other hand, is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. In fact, in the often-overlooked preface of *Frankenstein*, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley gives, in my opinion, an excellent definition of predication, as well as an explanation of what she is doing with her book that remains one of the best justifications for the value of science fiction around. Though the language shows its age, the definition is still current two hundred years later. I think it could safely preface just about any science fiction story or novel:

“The event on which the interest of the story depends . . . was recommended by the

novelty of the situations which it develops; and, however impossible as a physical fact, affords a point of view to the imagination for the delineating of human passions more comprehensive and commanding than any which the ordinary relations of existing events can yield" (italics mine).

There it is: the thing that gives science fiction its power. Mary Shelley calls it "the event upon which the interest of the story depends." Science fiction theorist Darko Suvin would call it a *novum*, but I think we can just call it a difference. A difference from the world-as-it-is. Sometimes, that difference is scientific. Sometimes it is technological. Sometimes it is an alteration in past historical events, or gender roles, or human governance, or something else entirely.

The difference the story is predicated upon can be almost anything, but the power of it is exactly as Mary Shelley states: it "affords a point of view to the imagination for the delineating of human passions more comprehensive and commanding than any which the ordinary relations of existing events can yield." Fiction that seeks (or pretends, really) to be identical with the world-as-it-is—fiction that consists of "the ordinary relation of existing events," lacks that power. It has powers of its own, but it lacks that one.

Predictive power is incidental. But *predicative* power, which has gifted the world with so many extraordinary stories, is the engine of science fiction. Science fiction's stories are lenses we can focus on our present moment, our past, and—often incidentally—the places we might be headed. With this power, we are simultaneously able to look at the "what-if" of the author's created world, and the "why this?" of our own.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley perfectly understood that power. I think all of science fiction's readers and writers understand it on some level, but sometimes we need to return to these ideas and enunciate for ourselves what science fiction is doing and why. It makes us better writers and better readers alike.

I hope the next time you see an article about science fiction's powers of prediction you will let the writer know that they are missing a letter in the word.