

Alien Autopsy

The science fictional frontier of Asian Studies



The term cyberAsia is both an observation of the technological progress exhibited in Asian societies, and a provocation concerning the status of Asia in the epistemic frameworks of 'the West'. Chris Goto-Jones contends that under certain conditions Asia serves as place-marker for a field of speculation that we might term science fictional. Where 'cyber' contains intimations of futurities and technologisation, cyberAsia and science fictional Asia converge.

Chris Goto-Jones

THE MEANING OF 'SCIENCE FICTIONAL ASIA' stretches from moments of representational techno-Orientalism in Euro-American literature at one end – where Japan, Hong Kong, or India become the fantastical site of a projected technological future – to an epistemic framework that privileges the disorientation of the West at the other. It is this final frontier that intrigues me. In particular, the status and purpose of the knowledge created or discovered during explorations of this frontier of knowledge, as well as in the authority of the author in each case. My central provocation is that there is a frontier at which the epistemic structures and objectives of science fiction (SF) and of Asian Studies (AS) meet, and that we might usefully see family resemblances between the two fields. If there is a place in which these two life-forms coincide as a common species, should we consider whether they might mate and produce some interesting offspring? Alien Studies?

To some extent, this frontier serves as both a caricature and a critique of the Area Studies enterprise as a whole, with AS the most striking case, marking out the dangerous and nebulous border between fictional representations and representations of fictions. Of course, as a caricature, this presentation makes no claims to being comprehensive or nuanced about all the varieties of SF or Area Studies (or even AS) – rather it focuses on the dimensions of a particular frontier at which particular aspects of those fields meet.

Clarifying the known. 1: Science Fiction

SF is already a difficult terrain, and its dimensions are continuously contested. It exists in a condition of peril within broader realms of literature. There have been various attempts to define it, but there is neither the space nor the need to elaborate them all here. Let us suffice with a series of thematic commonalities: SF is about technology and mechanisation and particularly about speculations regarding their social and interpersonal effects in the future - it is a product of modernity and of the industrial revolution. The other central, thematic concern of sci-fi is often considered to be the encounter with (or exploration of) difference, and occasionally with either the mystification or the demystification of difference. This has often been seen to tie SF to (post)colonialism.

Because, like the past, the future is a different country where they do things differently, these two characteristics (temporal and spatial explorations) converge around a single concern for the encounter with an Other, often figured in SF as a literal encounter with the alien. I still find Darko Suvin's 1979 characterisation of SF as 'the literature of cognitive estrangement' apt. I understand this provocative phrase to contain both a methodological marker – cognitive – and an intentional or purposive marker – estrangement. It characterises SF as a literature that accomplishes estrangement (whatever that might mean) via a process of cognition (whatever that might mean). This implies, of course, that other literatures seek objectives other than estrangement and employ means other than cognition (or at least that none combine the two).

In terms of estrangement, Suvin draws out a continuum between literature that seeks the 'exact recreation of the author's empirical environment' on the one hand to that which maintains an 'exclusive interest in a strange newness, a *novum*' (ibid.) on the other.² In terms of cognition, he claims to be relying on a Germanic sense of science as *Wissenschaft* (ie. one that encompasses the human and mental sciences as well as the material ones).³ This enables him to tie SF to the foundations of the real and to argue that estrangements that abandon (rather than creatively develop) the scientific conditions or conventions of the 'reality' should not be considered SF, but rather myth, fairytale or simply fantasy. For Suvin, SF is a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment.⁴

Missing from this description is a sense of function and purpose: what should be the impact of cognitive estrangement? What is the force of SF, if indeed it has any at all? Suvin, like most of the other leading SF theorists, most recently and powerfully Fredrick Jameson, is clear that the purpose of estrangement in this context is critique. In the most obvious terms, this means SF is frequently (albeit not necessarily) satirical. Rather, SF might be envisioned as playing a deliberate and deliberative role in the politics of knowledge: the purpose of cognitive estrangement is reflexive. That is, the author seeks to displace the reader from the everydayness of his/her context and challenge them to test their reality against the difference presented. The cognitive nature of the estrangement should make the alteriority of SF thinkable (even realistic) and thus both effective and affective.

Future or distant places (together with their various inhabitants) should be wrought as a mirror to the reader and his/her world. 'But the mirror [should not be] only a reflecting one, it is also a transforming one... the mirror is a crucible', revealing the innovative possibilities of an Other.⁵ SF aliens should not be so very alien after all: we should recognise ourselves (and the possibilities of ourselves) in them, otherwise they do not estrange us they simply alienate us. This is a crucial distinction. It leaves us with an expansion of Suvin:

SF is a textual tradition that aims at cognitive estrangement with a critically reflexive function in the politics of knowledge, challenging and endangering the scientific (*Wissenschaftlich*) suppositions that underlie the everyday context of the reader.

In other words, SF attempts to use difference to challenge the status quo. We'll return to the nature of this status quo later.

Clarifying the known. 2: Area Studies

If SF is a contested category, then Area Studies risks not being a category at all. Indeed, this field has been continuously under attack in various ways and from various angles certainly since the second half of the 20th century. The result is a field that is at least as defensive amongst its peers as SF. Responding to criticisms that it is little more than an atheoretical data-collector in the service of government interests, Area Studies has increasingly defended itself by defining its mission in terms of the epistemic violence that it can cause to the conventional disciplines, which it often designates as Eurocentric.

In a recent volume that attempts to sketch the shifting contours of this expansive field, Alan Tansman suggests that Area Studies might be considered an 'enterprise seeking to know, analyze, and interpret foreign cultures through a multidisciplinary lens'.⁶ Most scholars of Area Studies would find such a minimal and inclusive notion relatively unobjectionable, although even a slight rephrasing already begins to look a little provocative: to know, analyse, and interpret the alien using extra-disciplinary forms of knowledge.

In the same volume, David Szanton argues that 'Area Studies scholarship attempts to document the existence, internal logic, and theoretical implications of the distinctive social and cultural values, expressions, structures, and dynamics that shape societies and nations beyond Europe and the United States'.⁶ From this we might deduce that the 'status quo' referred to earlier refers to something Euro-American or 'Western' and that the proper subject of Area Studies is 'non-Western'. Whilst I have deep reservations about this position, it does appear to reflect the actual situation of Area Studies in the university (both in the past and today).

Immediately intriguing is that the spatial scope of Area Studies is defined in terms of a negation: places beyond Europe and the United States; the non-West. The non-West is not simply a politically offensive category but it is also infinitely expansive: whilst the privilege of 'Western' might only be awardable to a discrete socio-historic group of places and people, anywhere and anyone else is non-Western. Indeed, the non-West is literally everywhere the West is not. This observation teeters



'The real difficulty when defining the frontier between Asian Studies and Science Fiction, however, concerns the question of method'

on the brink of being facile, but it begins to become interesting in the company of SF, as we boldly go where no-one has gone before. The subject matter of Area Studies in the West, in its least politically correct form, is the alien, be that terrestrial or extra-terrestrial. Alien Studies, Area Studies and Asian Studies share a theoretical frontier: AS.

Let us posit (or perhaps anticipate): in 2025 intelligent life is discovered on the moon of a planet orbiting the distant star of Sirius. The study of that society and its culture will be the preserve of AS, since it will certainly be a non-Western civilization.

A key question at this point, just as it was in the case of SF, is: why should we be interested in a category of knowledge that is explicitly defined as being about 'something other than us' (no matter who we are)? This is an incredibly difficult and also intimate question.

For Szanton there are two basic answers.⁷ The first is the 'intrinsic value' and interest of difference – we might simply call this curiosity. This is a banal response and not in anyway exclusive to AS. The second, which is far more powerful and purposive, and which dominates much of the literature, is the way that the alien acts reflexively to 'de-naturalize the formulations and universalizing tendencies of the mainstream disciplines,' which are themselves Euro-American products.⁸

In other words, the core purpose of AS is to combat Eurocentricism in the academy on the basis that 'seriously seeking the diverse and alternative knowledges and experiences of other cultures and societies can be deeply challenging, decentering and [even] threatening.'⁹ The fundamental role of Area Studies is, in Szanton's provocative terms, to 'de-parochialize US- and Euro-centric visions of the world' that dominate the social sciences and humanities. The quest is not only for new knowledge or empirical data, but also for new kinds of knowledge.

This position represents a constructive variation on (or perhaps a reflexive reappropriation of) Said's critique of Orientalism, in which the 'Oriental Other' is engaged as a kind of mirror that reaffirms, through exoticised difference, the integrity and identity of the (Western) self. Here, however, difference is not seen as comforting or reassuring regarding a particular identity but rather as threatening to the universalist aspirations of that particularity (or simply as revealing those aspirations as naïve and unreflective versions of imperialism).

At this point, then, it may be enough to note some purposive kinship between this vision of AS and SF as cognitive estrangement: both are necessarily and centrally concerned with de-parochialising or estranging the self from the accepted conventions of knowledge in Europe and the US via the exploration of other cultures, which (at least in the case of SF) may be fictional, and via reflexive self-interrogation provoked by the findings.

Encountering the frontier

It seems to me, however, that the frontier between these fields is clearly marked. Despite the pretensions of a 'purposive kinship,' AS and SF stand on opposite sides of the fictional frontier, or the frontier of fiction. Or, to spin this another way: the frontier is reality itself.

While SF makes no explicit claims to be exploring the 'real world,' AS must engage with and interrogate 'real' aliens. In SF, the much lauded reflexivity is a kind of literary navel-gazing, while in AS it should be a scientific radicalisation of concrete political issues. We might argue that SF is a fictional projection of AS, or conversely that AS is a scientifically delimited version of SF.

I'd like to spend a little time testing this frontier, since, like the borders drawn on maps, it seems much less clear when you're flying over it in reality.

Function, purpose and the redundancy of reality

My first concern about this boundary is the relevance of reality in the first place. This is not to say that I don't recognise the category of the real or that I believe in the essentially illusionary or fictive nature of all things. Rather, it seems that the various definitions of the purpose of AS make scant reference to knowledge of reality. Instead, the purpose of AS might be considered to be the de-parochialisation, the de-naturalisation, or even simply the endangering of the universalising tendencies of the mainstream disciplines and their European roots.

The real issue here is not the excavation of new truths or kinds of knowledge per se, but rather the use to which those knowledges can be put to challenge the status quo. In this context, it seems entirely legitimate (or even necessary) to ask why the reality of

the particular non-Western country in question is relevant. Does Asia have to be real in order to be the subject of AS?

There are many answers to this question, of course, but on closer inspection none of them appear to be absolute barriers. The frontier is more a hazy and expansive zone than a crisp border. One possible answer is that we are simply more likely to be moved to serious reflexive, de-naturalisation or estrangement if our impetus to do so is the concrete experience of a group of others in whom we can recognise ourselves (rather than a fictional group of deliberately imagined others). If this is true, it is a matter of degree: reality is *more* effective and affective than fiction when it comes to cognitive estrangement.

I'm willing to take this seriously, but I'm not yet willing to believe it. Even though it's a rather soft claim, it also seems fragile. It is not necessarily true: experience tells us that fiction can be more effective and affective than reality when it comes to cognitive estrangement. Indeed, in SF, the methodological marker 'cognitive' appears to have been placed precisely to mitigate against the alleged ineffectiveness of fiction: SF can/should be thinkable as real even if it is not a representation of an actual reality.

Perhaps the real function of reality in this framework should be captured (this is a moral should) by the distinction posed earlier between estrangement and alienation. That is, the effectiveness of presentations of the 'expansively non-Western' is contingent upon the 'Westerner' being able to recognise him/herself in the dilemmas of the other and hence recognise the possibility of transformation of self that this other represents. In other words, something has to connect the reader with those represented in the text, and that something could be reality.

Unfortunately (again in a moral sense), reality is not always enough to prevent alienation. Indeed, many of the disciplinary critics of AS are explicit that, for instance, the intellectual traditions of the non-West are so alien to those of the West that 'we' cannot 'recognise ourselves' in their dilemmas or solutions. Richard Rorty even claims that an alien visiting our world from Sirius would simply give up and go home if asked to compare a Buddhist sense of self with that of a European sense; the two are unrecognisable to each other.¹⁰

The point is that, in practice, the border between West and non-West might be experienced as more alienating than the border between reality and fiction. For some, a Buddhist model of selfhood cannot transform 'our' thinking about the self, although the science fictional figure of an alien from Sirius can help to persuade us of the truth of this. Certain Euro-American philosophers are alienated from Tibetan thinkers, but only estranged from envoys from Sirius. SF is less alien than AS. In other words, when it comes to cognitive estrangement, reality may be beside the point (which has some serious moral and political implications).

Narrating and imagining the alien

The flip side of this issue concerns the matter of authorial authority and the meaning of textual reality. At its most basic: can we really talk about reality in texts, or are we always dealing with representations mediated by authors with varying authorities?

There is a wide and sophisticated literature on this question and there is no need to rehearse it here.¹¹ But let me reiterate: I am not interested in making the philosophical claim that all texts are essentially fictions and hence that there is no epistemological difference between representations of Sirius, Laputa, Glubdubdrib and Japan.¹² I am interested, rather, in exploring the frontier where SF and AS appear to meet and what sets them apart if they really share some kind of purposive kinship.

A possible answer involves two core questions: what is the author's subject? i.e. what is he/she 'seeking to know, analyse, and interpret'; and what devices are employed to accomplish this?

In terms of the first question, we have already seen that the provisional and expansive answer for both AS and SF is the dubious category of 'non-Western' cultures. However, we need to ask whether authors are trying to represent or analyse real cultures or imaginary ones. In the case of AS, we must assume that authors seek to represent real cultures as directly and transparently as possible (accepting that absolutely direct and transparent representations are impossible). In the case of SF as cognitive estrangement, we also assume that authors seek to represent real(istic) cultures, albeit creatively or indirectly with varying degrees of proximity to the real. Recall that representations of the entirely imaginary are fantasy, myth or fairytale, not SF. In other words, the question of the nature of the writer's subject erects only a hazy frontier between SF and AS.

The real difficulty when defining the frontier between AS and SF, however, concerns the question of method. While it is clear that SF employs a form of Imagineering (with varying degrees

of scientific research in order to satisfy the 'cognitive' requirement), AS is not able to differentiate itself through recourse to a rigorous disciplinary methodology. Indeed, AS often voices an explicit commitment to inter-, multi- or extra-disciplinary techniques and new forms of knowledge creation. Its method is non-exclusively defined – could it include Imagineering? There is a perceptible haze around the frontier, and hence writers may slip from one territory into the other. There is a no-man's land of Alien Studies.

Conclusions

It would obviously be ridiculous to argue that AS, even the study of cyberAsia, is a variety of science fiction. But it does not seem quite as ridiculous to claim that there is a science fictional frontier to AS, at which it interweaves with some of the conventions, practices and goals of SF. At some point, both seek to 'document the existence, internal logic, and theoretical implications of the distinctive social and cultural values, expressions, structures, and dynamics that shape societies' in the non-West. And both aim to use these documents to denaturalise the West.

It is interesting that both AS and SF appear to have pushed out into this shared frontier as part of aggressive processes of self-defence within larger realms that constantly assault their credibility. This generates a number of implications. In terms of method, AS moves most strongly away from its science fictional frontier when it embraces rigorously disciplinary work (merely focussed on Asia). However, this also risks undermining the radical agenda of AS to de-parochialise the conventional disciplines themselves – in the extreme this is a capitulation to this parochialism. At the other extreme, AS might explore its science fictional frontier more explicitly, questing for new types of knowledge to endanger the status quo, developing new theories and methods, boldly going where no-one has gone before. However, this direction risks transforming AS into a literary genre.

Finally, I wonder about the ethical status of knowledge at this frontier. In particular, since the knowledge generated there is explicitly instrumental in purpose (it is to be used to de-naturalise the West), I wonder whether SF could be seen as the moral conscience of AS. Following Kant, treating another as a means rather than as an end is an absolute evil. Hence, if we seek to use, say, Japan as a foil to de-parochialise Western disciplines, wouldn't it be morally superior to use Swift's Japan in *Gulliver's Travels* or Gibson's Japan in *Neuromancer*?

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A version of this paper was originally presented on the 'Traces' panel at the Modern Languages Association, San Francisco, 30th December 2008

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- Suvin, Darko 'Estrangement and Cognition,' in Gunn, James & Mathew Candelaria (eds). 2005. *Speculations on Speculation*. Oxford: Scarecrow Press, p.24. Suvin himself seems interested in the contours of the landscape between the extremes, in the ways in which adventures (in particular those of the 18th and 19th century) are often cast as 'syncretic travelogue and voyage imaginaire' at once both daydream and intelligence report. In a number of ways, this might be a description of all authored texts.
- Ibid. p.32
- Ibid. p.27
- Ibid. p.25
- Tansman, Alan Tansman. 2004. 'Japanese Studies: The Intangible Act of Translation,' in Szanton, David (ed.) *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p.184
- Szanton, op. cit. p2
- Here I'm ignoring the various answers that serve as common critiques of the whole Area Studies enterprise, such as the argument that the purpose of Area Studies is to 'know thy enemy.' This critique is especially common in the USA since World War Two.
- Ibid. p.2
- Ibid. p.2
- This argument is developed in Goto-Jones, Chris. 2005. 'If the past is a different country are different countries in the past,' in *Philosophy*, 80:311
- In the field of anthropology, see in particular, Clifford, James. 1988. *The Predicament of Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- A fascinating interrogation of the function of Japan in *Gulliver's Travels* is Markley, Robert. 2004. 'Gulliver and the Japanese: The Limits of the Postcolonial Past,' in *Modern Language Quarterly*, 65:3

