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Science Fiction and Empire

In this essay, I will make a preliminary attempt at cognitive mapping. I mean to look at sf as an expression of the political-cultural transformation that originated in European imperialism and was inspired by the ideal of a single global technological regime. I will make the claim that the conditions for the emergence of sf as a genre are made possible by three factors: the technological expansion that drove real imperialism, the need felt by national audiences for literary-cultural mediation as their societies were transformed from historical nations into hegemons, and the fantastic model of achieved technoscientific Empire.

A quick list of the nations that have produced most of the sf in the past century and a half shows a distinct pattern. The dominant sf nations are precisely those that attempted to expand beyond their national borders in imperialist projects: Britain, France, Germany, Soviet Russia, Japan, and the US.1 The pattern is clear, but not simple. English and French sf took off when their imperial projects were at their heights, and have continued to thrive long after their colonies gained independence.2 German sf was primarily a product of Weimar—that is, after the collapse of the short-lived German imperium.3 Japanese sf—which is now one of the most influential of contemporary international styles—also produced relatively little before the end of World War II.4 Soviet sf picked up a rich Russian tradition of satirical and mystical scientific fantasy and adapted it to its own revolutionary mysticism in the 1920s; after a long dormancy under Stalin, it revived again during the thaw of the 1960s, only to evaporate with the fall of Communism.5 In the US, sf was a well-developed minor genre in the nineteenth century; it exploded in the 1920s and has continued its hegemony ever since. Whether this occurred during the collapse of imperialism as a world-historical project, or fully within a pax Americana that can stand as the American Empire, we will have to examine. Our answers may not only help us to interpret how the sf genre functions in twentieth-century cultural history, but also make us sensitive to its function as a mediator between national literary traditions and that chimerical beast, global technoculture.

To conduct this investigation, we must be clear about certain concepts that it is hard to be clear about. By sf, we should understand not an ideal category with a putative social or aesthetic logic, but what national audiences understand to be sf—which is less a class than a jelly that shifts around but doesn’t lose its mass. Some core elements of the genre appear in every sf culture, and help to establish an international prototype for what audiences consider sf. But there are significant differences at the “margins” of the class.6 We should also keep in mind that imperialist projects took different forms in different national cultures, depending on when they were embarked upon, the character of the home culture, and their material technological relations. I approach the matter as a complex
evolution from imperialist projects that were expansions from nation-consolidating modernizing projects—i.e., attaching territories to the nation-state with the naive belief that the metropole would not be changed—to the condition of global market capitalism that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, in their book *Empire* (2000), treat as postmodern empire. Sf, I will argue, has been driven by a desire for the imaginary transformation of imperialism into Empire, viewed not primarily in terms of political and economic contests among cartels and peoples, but as a technological regime that affects and ensures the global control system of de-nationalized communications. It is in this sense that Empire is the fantastic entelechy of imperialism, the ideal state that transcends the national competitions leading toward it.

For most commentators, imperialism is the ideological justification for attempts by a nation-state to extend its power over other, weaker territories, in competition with similar nation-states striving for the same goals. Hardt and Negri’s concept of Empire, by contrast, is the more or less achieved regime of global capitalism. This regime fatally restricts the power of nation-states, and maintains itself through institutions of global governance and exchange, information technologies, and the de facto military dominance of the United States.

I am not concerned with whether Hardt and Negri’s model accurately describes the real conditions of the global capitalist regime. Its thesis is being put to the test at this very moment, as the US pursues a conquest that resembles classical imperialism at least as much as it does global conflict management. We will see in time whether it has irreparably disturbed the Pax Americana on which so much of Hardt and Negri’s theory rests, or whether it has dramatically expanded the power of the American Empire to enforce “world peace.” For my part, Hardt and Negri’s notion is thin stuff upon which to base a critique of global capitalism. It is, however, immensely useful as a tool for understanding contemporary geopolitical mythology, as a cognitive map, in Jameson’s terms, of the present. It manages to combine crucial ideas about globalization shared by multinational capitalism and Marxist critiques of imperialism; and by doing so it describes an imaginary world-picture in which fundamental historical transformations are conceptualized and rationalized. As a political model, it has the flavor of sf—and thus joins other such political sf-myths as Haraway’s cyborg, Baudrillard’s simulacra, and Deleuze-Guattari’s topologies. As a world-model, it is simultaneously an ideological fiction and a way of experiencing the world. It is also what Peter Stockwell calls an architext: a complex cognitive metaphor onto which can be mapped readers’ sense of reality and also the many different parts of the science-fictional megatext—the shared body of works and assumptions of the sf genre (204). In this sense, the idea of Empire is like that of utopia. Indeed, I will argue that the utopian architext is closely linked to the model of Empire. I will emphasize this in science fiction by treating real imperialism as the growing pains of imaginary Empire. I will treat Empire as the entelechy, the embedded goal, the conceptual fulfillment of imperialism.

**SF and Imperialism.** The role of technology in propelling imperialist projects
is often neglected. And yet technological development was not only a precondition for the physical expansion of the imperialist countries but an immanent driving force. It led to changes of consciousness that facilitated the subjugation of less developed cultures, wove converging networks of technical administration, and established standards of “objective measurement” that led inevitably to myths of racial and national supremacy (Adas 145). It stands to reason that sf, a genre that extols and problematizes technology’s effects, would emerge in those highly modernized societies where technology had become established as a system for dominating the environment and social life. Imperialist states were at the forefront of technological development. Their projects had what Thomas P. Hughes calls “technological momentum” (111).

The tools of exploration and coercion formed systems, as did the tools of administration and production in the colonies, and these systems gradually meshed. Colonial territories were treated as free zones, where new techniques and instruments could be tried out by companies and bureaucracies far from the constraints of conservative national populations. These innovations then fed back into the metropole, inviting more and more investment, technical elaboration, and new applications. The exponential growth of mechanical production and the production of mechanism continually widened the gaps between imperial agents and their subject peoples. Supremacy became a function of the technological regime (Adas 134).

There can be no doubt that without constantly accelerating technological innovation imperialism could not have had the force it did, or progressed so rapidly. Without steamships and gunboats, repeating rifles and machine guns, submarine cables, telegraph lines, and anti-malarial medicines, the power of imperial adventurers would have been greatly limited, and perhaps not even possible. But imperial technology was not only a set of tools used for exploitation of the colonies. Imperial future shock blew back into the home country, consolidating a new idea of political power linked to technological momentum, essentially colonizing the homeland too, and at a speed that made all resistance futile. Each global technological success brought power and money to technological projects, creating a logrolling effect that drove irrational political and economic exploitation beyond its tolerances, in grand-scale uncontrolled social experiments. It also fueled ever more focused and complex technological momentum—until social conflicts, both within and beyond the national borders, could only be seen as politically manageable through technological means. With imperialism, politics became technological.

Let us look at this proposition from the perspective of literary history. It is generally accepted that the novel was an instrument for establishing bourgeois national consciousness. In Benedict Anderson’s well-known formulation, the novel was one of the tools for constructing the imaginary sense of national community in modernizing societies. The Marxist Georg Lukács, for his part, argued that the novel developed in every national culture in more or less the same way because modernization followed a single historical trajectory. A society was either on the bus—indeed, like England and France, sitting behind the wheel—or off the bus and in the dust. The fact that novels were written in
national vernaculars, relying on certain collective memories and myths, was
deficit to Lukács. However, students of the Western novel can’t ignore that
novels were also projects of national consolidation and normalization. Novels
were attempts to reconcile at least two great competing cultural desires: to
preserve the specific knowledge of a society’s present in its language and
collective memory (what Balzac called “the archeology of the present”), and to
ascend into the world community of modern players, to join the Club of Nations
at the forefront of historical progress.

If the popularity of a literary genre is a sign of its power to mediate real
social dilemmas through imaginary resolutions, what is sf’s role? What and how
does it mediate? Sf is generally set in marked contrast with the bourgeois realism
of the novel. It has been linked to a variety of anti-realist, and so anti-bourgeois,
literary forms (most frequently, pastoral, romance, and utopia). In the US, sf’s
most enthusiastic audiences were originally on the margins of the bourgeoisie:
recent immigrants, working-class readers, and students of technical schools; for
them the fantasies of physical mastery and engineering know-how offered an
imaginary alternative source of social power to the norms of middle-class
existence (Stockwell 99). In Weimar Germany, by contrast, sf was directed
primarily to the middle class, but a class preoccupied with national resentment
and revenge fantasies (Nagl 30-31). In both cases, the fantasies were quite
similar to the ideologies of mastery that inspired the imperialist adventurers and
colonists. Historians treat Cecil Rhodes’s sublime statement of regret as the
consummate expression of imperialist desire:

The world is nearly all parcelled out, and what there is left of it, is being divided
up, conquered and colonized. To think of these stars that you see overhead at
night, these vast worlds which we can never reach. I would annex the planets if
I could; I often think of that. It makes me sad to see them so clear and yet so far.
(qtd in Hardt and Negri 221)

To paraphrase Philip K. Dick’s Palmer Eldritch: imperialism promises the stars;
sf delivers.

I am not arguing that sf replaces bourgeois realism as the main mediating
agent of late modernist national culture in the West. That would too great a
claim. (Even so, some versions of that argument will make sense, if instead of
sf we put forward a larger class of fantastic writing that incorporates sf’s
traditional devices and world-pictures, a version of slipstream writing in which
bourgeois realism, the non-Western fantastic, visionary satire, and sf are
blended.) Aspiring technocratic audiences did not replace the bourgeois
national publics wholesale. If sf took on some of the role of mediating between
the national pasts and the late modern “future present,” what role did national
traditions have in the cultural work of sf?

Students of imperialism know from the work of Hannah Arendt and Edward
Said that imperial expansion had a profound effect on culture in the home
countries, even when the effect was hardly noticed at the time. Since most
bourgeois nation-states had completed their political consolidation only recently,
and their social consolidation not at all in many cases, their underlying conflicts
were often still active and menacing. Imperialism attempted to resolve living domestic problems by exporting them beyond the borders of the Homeland. As these “offworld” colonial constituencies established themselves, they put great pressure on the metropoles to give up certain constraints that went with the nation-state, and to adjust to the “facts” of occupied territories: technological violence was justified by ideologies of supremacy (Arendt 136-38). The corrosive effect that this justification, and the reliance on technological violence, had on the most positive institutions and values of the nation-state is seen climactically in the attempt by the home powers to reproduce their offworld successes on the Old Earth of Europe in the First World War (Adas 365-66). At that point, the colliding would-be empires revealed that their technosystems had determined their identities more than their histories had. Their national traditions could not extend to the outer planets, mainly because the colonists themselves refused to accept the constraints placed on their liberty. For adventurers such as Rhodes, the national flag had been merely an asset in the work of imperial accumulation; for the home populations, it had represented the very reason for that accumulation. For imperialists, the twentieth-century’s world wars proved merely that national identity is a volatile investment instrument; for national populations it catastrophically undermined the politics of reality itself.

Sf raises some very specific questions in this historical context. One is: are the differences in national traditions of sf due primarily to the desire to retain traditional cultural values historically established against the engine of technological expansion? Is this why we notice the significant differences of tone, of generic affiliation, of conventions of representation, that mark French sf from British, US from German, Japanese from Russian? If so, then sf may have much the same function that novelistic realism had in bourgeois national modernization: managing the abstract techno-political leap forward out of “domestic” culture, from a nation among nations to a global culture.

Another question is: has sf been a privileged thematic genre (perhaps in the way that film has been a privileged material medium) for expressing and representing the dialectics of this imperial process, because of its central fascination with technology? Has sf labored to manage the technological momentum inherent in imperialism, by infusing it with national cultural “dialects”—symbol systems, literary forms and formulas, artistic techniques, and discourse practices?

To study this genealogy, we will have to correlate at least three domains:

1) the character of the imperial moment—what difference did it make whether the expansion was a gradual and articulated process, as with the British and French; or intense, short, highly artificial, and self-reflective like the German and the Japanese; or a smooth accession and aggrandizement of economic and military power, as in the case of the US?

2) the character of the techno-culture—was it widely diffused in social life, as in the US, Britain, and France, was it a foreign import as in Japan, was it associated with revolutionary mysticism as in Russia and the Soviet Union, was it an expression of romantic longing and resentment as in Germany? From the rear-view mirror of achieved Empire, what role did a given technoculture play:
dominant agency, marginal late-coming, adversary counter-imperialism, or historical sublation?

3) finally, the character of the literary-cultural traditions that infused the fiction of sf. This is the zone of science fiction’s literary unconscious. National literary or artistic forms may lead us to the traditions that distinguish the styles of different nations’ sf. Clearly, sf is identifiable by the icons it uses: the spaceship, the alien, the robot, super-weapons, bio-monsters, and the more recent additions, wormholes, the net, the cyborg, and so on. It is not difficult to link these to colonialist and imperialist practices. They represent the power tools of imperial subjects, the transformations of the objects of domination, and the ambiguities of subjects who find themselves with split affinities. In these terms, sf’s icons are abstract modern universals, free of any specific cultural associations. Yet when we view or read sf of different national styles, we feel marked differences. The same icons are cast in the mode of political and/or visionary fantasy in Soviet sf; scientific romance in British sf and its slapstick, dance-hall Red Dwarf inversions; as fanciful ironic surrealism in post-Verne French sf and its vertiginous inversion, the camp of Métal Hurlant; as supersaturated nationalist romanticism in German sf and its militant ecophile sf descendants; as catastrophism in Japanese sf and its hidden puppet-theatre traditions; and as galactic Edisonian problem-solving in US sf and its wired-beatnik bourgeois-bashing twin of tech noir. These are, of course, crude characterizations. National styles develop along with social life, and change constantly in response to influences, both domestic and foreign. There are also clear signs that these currents are converging, precisely because of the delight in diversity that Negri and Hardt consider characteristic of capitalist globalism.

**SF and Empire.** If we look at sf’s connection with technoscientific empire only from the perspective of historical imperialism, we will see an exoskeleton, the genre as the interface between the pressures of global capitalist evolution and national technoculture. To take a truly dialectical view, we also have to look at the internal space of the genre, its world-model, its assumptions of conceptual design through which it makes politics, society, ontology, and technology science-fictional. I believe that this imaginary world-model is technoscientific Empire—Empire that is managed, sustained, justified, but also riven by simultaneously interlocking and competing technologies of social control and material expansion. Sf artists construct stories about why this Empire is desired, how it is achieved, how it is managed, how it corrupts (for corrupt it must), how it declines and falls, how it deals with competing claims to imperial sovereignty, or how it is resisted. The history of sf reflects the changing positions of different national audiences as they imagine themselves in a developing world-system constructed out of technology’s second nature.

To see this connection concretely, let us take a quick look at the qualities that Hardt and Negri attribute to Empire. Where imperialism is about unlimited growth, embodied in unlimited expansion (of capital, markets, and production), empire is also about the consolidation of the expansions of the past, and the irresistible attraction to imperial order. Its expansion is driven not by greed or
national pride, but by the putatively superior ability of the imperial order to deliver peace and security.

Empire seeks to establish a single overdetermining power that is located not in a recognizable territory, but in an ideology of abstract right enforced by technologies of control. Its characteristic space is horizontal, expansive, and limitless; it exhausts and suspends historical time, pragmatically (i.e., cynically) taking up typological justifications from the past and the future as the occasion demands. Its goal is the management of global conflict, “world peace.” Empire continually reproduces and revitalizes itself through the management of local crises, and indeed by the transformation of potentially global challenges into administrative conflicts. It eschews dialectics and transcendence (which are inherently destabilizing) in favor of constant intervention. It intervenes both in the social world and in the minds of private individuals, two spheres it fuses through pervasive communications technologies. Its physical space is limitless, open to perpetual expansion, and its social space is open to variety, hybridity, and relentless denaturing. Empire is the consummate replacement of nature by artifice. In its ontology, all existence is derived from a single, infinitely varied immanence—with rules that allow for infinite exceptions, but not repudiation.

Empire is the fusion of force and legitimacy. Since order is its driving value, its driving motive is enforcement. Its laws are not the laws of God, but of science. These are theorized globally, but they are enforced locally, as exceptions. Technology pervades Empire; it constructs a power grid through which it distributes its force and, by doing so, converts the line of communication into a power-cord. It rules, write Hardt and Negri, through the bomb, money, and ether (345). Its centers of power are the ganglia we know as global cities. To these, we can add Haraway’s privileged sites of biopolitical virtuality: the gene, the fetus, and the lab—distributed interfaces where the essential conflicts of capitalism between social control and unbridled material expansion are ceaselessly engaged.

As an imaginary political domain, Empire is related to utopia. Utopia is an idealized image of the city-state—indeed, the nation-state—where internecine conflicts do not arise, since the ideal congruence of right and law is an ontological given. Utopias resolve inherent differences through the irresistible logic of their order. They are spatially circumscribed, and so they easily contain their people, reinforcing their self-identity. Their hegemony may extend past their city walls, but they are essentially insular. They do not expand, and so their stability depends on their strict adherence to natural laws of balance. They are scientific and rational because their laws reflect a logic of stability inherent in natural reason.

The model of Empire is grounded in the history of real empires. Utopia is crafted from an abstract conjunction of community and natural harmony; Empire is energized by a more concrete relationship: the conjunction of might and right. Even in its most idealized form, Empire is a complex machine that distributes—and thereby produces—force. In utopias, force is occasionally rationalized as a way of protecting the balance between people and state, and insuring the inviolability of the enclave. In Empire, it is the vitalizing condition
of possibility. All the social and creative endeavors of imperial peoples are shot through with the institutional violence that makes them materially possible. Imperial violence is so powerful that it must expand; contained, its society would implode like a black hole.

SF’s debt to utopia is great; but it owes more to Empire. For SF’s technoscience—which is the basis of its icons, energies, and imaginary historical conflicts—has little to do with utopia’s institutionalized balancing acts and containment strategies. Technoscientific projects expand, mesh with others, and gain power from grand-scale conflicts that inspire new resolutions, which then evolve into new mechanisms. The expansion of technoscience is both internal (the logic of its technical applicability and improvement) and external (the logic of its universal application). An engine aspires to maximum relevance. Violently overcoming obstacles placed in its way by “nature” (which is nothing less that the world-as-given before imperial technologies go to work on it), technoscience charges all its claims to right and law with the irresistible expansion of its violence. The force is justified, however, in the name of peace and order.

Before armies and proconsuls, technoscientific Empire favors the adventurer, the Odyssean handyman far from home, whose desire for movement and conflict inspires his skill with tools. With each fight and each sociotechnical problem solved, the imperial handyman gains increased personal sovereignty and power. As Empire produces perpetual conflict on local levels that invite its intervention (a process Hardt and Negri call “omnicrisis” [189]), imperial fiction produces adventures in an immanent, lateral cosmos. SF is most comfortable with such imperial adventure-worlds.

Even the classical genres to which SF is often traced (the pastoral, the romance, the utopian cityscape) originate in the imperial imagination (specifically from Alexandria, Byzantium, and Rome), as do their shadow-genres, the slave’s narrative, the journey through hell, and the dark city. Utopias demand placement, position, definition; they are, as Louis Marin names them, games with spaces, real maps of imaginary territories. Empires are, by contrast, unbounded in space, and restless in time. Empire is a model of constant, managed transition: its worlds are perpetually at some point on the timeline of imperial evolution, from initial expansion, through incorporation, and then corruption, to decline and fall.

There is much more we could say about this rich political myth. But even this is enough to see how much this imaginary technoscientific Empire offers SF. The genre’s favorite counterfactual operations and mechanisms are all made rational by imperial ontology. Time-machines, faster-than-light travel, galactic history, parallel universes, the restless reconstruction of relationships between the center and the periphery endlessly replayed in the relationship between Old Earth and the offworlds, aliens and cyborgs, space opera, utopia and dystopia—these motifs, like many others in SF, rely on a cosmos governed by the laws and right of technoscience, and yet are open to almost infinite variation. SF is an endlessly productive engine of local crises in a highly tolerant universe from which it is impossible to depart.

Hardt and Negri’s model of Empire has a distinctly science-fictional feel to
Empire appears in the form of a very high-tech machine: it is virtual, built to control the marginal event, and organized to dominate and when necessary intervene in the breakdowns of the system (in line with the most advanced technologies of robotic production). (39)

The imperial order is formed not only on the basis of its powers of accumulation and global extension, but also on the basis of its capacity to develop itself more deeply, to be reborn, and to extend itself throughout the biopolitical latticework of world society. (41)

The empire’s institutional structure is like a software program that carries a virus along with it, so that it is continually modulating and corrupting the institutional forms around it. (197-98)

This is the imperial Sprawl, ruled not through decrees and armies (well, mostly not through armies) but through communication/control networks that distribute virtual power. This power is internalized by imperial citizens as surely as if they had chips embedded in their brains. In Empire, subjectivity is multicentered, produced through institutions that are terminally unstable, always breaking down. As the integrity of social institutions (such as schools, families, courts, and prisons) fragments, and the once-clear subject-positions associated with them weaken, the call for imperial comprehensiveness is strengthened, inaugurating a comprehensive ideology, a finely distributed pragmatic myth of networked, globally interlocking power. This is the twenty-minutes-into-the-future of Philip K. Dick, J.G Ballard, William Gibson, Pat Cadigan, and Mamoru Oshii, where computerized communications operate 24/7, generating a mindscape of consuming subjects into which capitalist ideology feeds directly. It perpetually breaks down and reconstructs human consciousness, as in a Cadigan novel, into provisional target-identities to which the nostalgic, utopian dream of wholeness can be sold and resold perpetually in variant, sometimes mutually contradictory forms, and which can be hired to convey its fictions of sovereignty ever deeper into the self that once imagined it was itself sovereign. In this empire, there are infinite possibilities of projection, but only one reality.

The most natural thing in the world is that the world appears to be politically united, that the market is global, and that power is organized throughout its universality. Imperial politics articulates being in its global extension—a great sea that only the winds and the current move. The neutralization of the transcendental imagination is thus the first sense in which the political in the imperial domain is ontological. (354)

Since contemporary imperial power does not emanate from one center, but rather from the cyberspatial ganglia of postmodern metropoli, resistance manifests itself in the daily refusal on the part of “the multitude” to follow commands. For Hardt and Negri, revolution is neither possible nor desirable, since no class can act as the self-conscious agent of history. Freedom rests, as in Gibson’s world, in finding one’s own uses for things. In contrast with sabotage,
the resistance strategy of national modernism, resistance under Empire consists of withdrawing consent, of *desertion* (212). Even the greatest rebels are refuseniks, choosing to withdraw, leaving behind them, like the fused AIs in *Neuromancer* (1984), a world in which “things are things” (270). Although this strategy hardly promises much as a way of landing blows against the empire, it is a dominant motif in the countercultural “Lost in Space” (or alternatively, “Lost in the Urban Labyrinth”) subgenre. (Ironically, *Lost in Space* [tv series, 1965-68; film 1998] itself is as hysterically conservative as *Robinson Crusoe*.) Where the overtly imperial mode accepts the hierarchical network of administration—Starfleet commanders still representing the Federation—even mainstream popular works such as *Farscape* (1999-2003) and *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995-2001) try to establish a de-centralized web of relationships in the uncharted territories, now just a wormhole away from the past (and the politics of empire).

This homology between Empire and sf extends to formal levels. The cinematic serial form, for example, is particularly well-suited for imperial sf. It permits an enormous variety of elements to be juxtaposed with only minimal motivation. In each episode, yet another cultural metaphor of spatial or temporal disruption is managed. This has been true from the earliest versions, such as *Flash Gordon*, to more recent ones—e.g., *Star Trek* and *Farscape*. The serial permits alien and local elements to be acknowledged, without threatening the order of things. The physically infinite expanse of space in such forms is generally controlled by forms of recursion and recapitulation—plot devices revealing that far-flung differences are related to the terrestrial metropole’s perennial problems. At its most intellectual extremes, sf can even imagine that basic laws of nature are artificial, tools for the manifestation and communication of power—as, for instance, Stanislaw Lem’s notion in “A New Cosmogony” of Great Cosmic Civilizations that change underlying cosmic laws in order to communicate with each other (and prevent human beings from ever threatening their hegemony).

Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* is a creature of its time. Its model is the image of global capitalism that crystallized immediately after the first Gulf War. Their vision is essentially the liberal world-picture, slightly Marxified, of a post-Fordist international service economy attending the transformation of production by computers and robots. The authors have surprisingly little to say about technologies other than communication/control nets. For them, technology signifies control, the “imperial machine” (34). Their conception of historical imperialism, too, ignores the technological momentum that demolished the dams and breakwaters of the nation-states, and created the constantly mutating channels of global flows. From the perspective of sf, *Empire* belongs to a special subgenre—let’s call it the sf of global management—with affinities not only to cyberpunk, but to Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation* novels (1951-53), James Blish’s *Cities in Flight* series (1955-1962), and *Star Trek*.

Sf’s imperial imagination is more comprehensive than this. Since the basic conditions of sf are made possible by the hypothesis of the immanent ontology of technoscience, the genre sets out to imagine the effects of any technology that
might affect the way we live now. This includes not only the near-future applications of already operative communication/control technologies, but technoscience that might radically transform the most basic aspects of physical reality, such as nanotech, faster-than-light space travel, genetic engineering, etc. The only restriction sf writers have historically set for themselves is that the powers in conflict must test technology as a basis for sovereignty. Sometimes the drama is explicit, as in overt imperial science fictions. In works as various as H.G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* (1898), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1950), *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* (1956), Frank Herbert’s *Dune* (1965), Joe Haldeman’s *The Forever War* (1974), *Star Wars* (1977), Orson Scott Card’s *Ender’s Game* (1985), Bruce Sterling’s *Schismatrix* (1985), Dan Simmons’s *Hyperion* (1990), Ursula K. Le Guin’s *HAINISH* novels and Iain Banks’s *CULTURE* novels, antagonistic technological regimes compete for dominance. Whatever their differences may be, however great the gulfs between them, they operate in the same social-ontological continuum, the most salient quality of which is the ability of sentient beings to construct technological cultures to manipulate and extend their power over the worlds in play.

In the human-against-nature varieties of sf descended from Verne, heroic protagonists use their know-how to cope with problems posed by hostile natural phenomena. They may be ultimately successful, as in most catastrophe films, or they may fall to the superior power of the physical universe, as in works like Arkady and Boris Strugatsky’s *Far Rainbow* (1963) and Ōkō Komatsu’s *Japan Sinks* (1973). Whatever the outcomes, each contest is a local test case for the resilience and maturity of human technoscience as a species enterprise. Even in stories that take resolutely anti-technological stances, and where the technoscientific empire takes an Ozymandian fall, such as George R. Stewart’s *Earth Abides* (1949), the terms of struggle are determined by technoscience. Technological culture’s incapacity against the universe is the point of such parables.

To say that sf is a genre of empire does not mean that sf artists seek to serve the empire. Most serious writers of sf are skeptical of entrenched power, sometimes because of its tyranny, sometimes because it hobbles technological innovation. This is one reason why some Marxist critics consider the genre to be inherently critical, despite the fact that careful social analysis rarely plays a central role in sf narratives. Fredric Jameson, by contrast, has argued that sf thematizes (and indeed imitates) the way global capitalism prevents dialectical historical awareness from coming to revolutionary consciousness. Jameson traces the origin of sf in the West from Verne, whose works began to appear precisely at the point of transition from metropolitan modernism to imperialism (149). Jameson’s terms are different from the ones under discussion here, but it may be a short step from his view to the one I am proposing. *Pace* Hardt and Negri, the technoscientific Empire that makes sf possible has much in common with Jameson’s negative totality.

In the past fifty years, sf has come to occupy an important place in highly technologized cultures. In more and more areas, modernization wipes away pre-modern, and indeed pre-postmodern, hierarchical and transcendental world-
views that obstruct market rationality and technological rationalization. Hypercapitalism labors to replace them with the “multicultural” coexistence of irresolvable, irreducible, and intractable differences that must never develop into serious challenges to imperial sovereignty. The utopian ideal of universal right and law is replaced by the imperial practice of corruption—i.e., the constant violation of universality in the interest of power.

Empire requires that all relations be accidental. Imperial power is founded on the rupture of every determinate ontology. Corruption is simply the sign of the absence of any ontology. In the ontological vacuum, corruption becomes necessary, objective. Imperial sovereignty thrives on the proliferating contradictions corruption gives rise to; it is stabilized by instabilities, by its impurities and admixtures; it is calmed by the panic and anxieties it continually engenders. Corruption names the perpetual process of alteration and metamorphosis, the anti-foundational foundation, the deontological mode of being. (Hardt and Negri 202)

Empire manages its populations by bombarding them with a multitude of subject positions, a multitude of hailings. Each one pretends to offer the prospect of unity, consummation, the fulfillment of wishes, yet each is comfortably corrupt. They reproduce the imperial process of establishing sovereignty (for the market, for law and order) by creating and managing crises in individual subjects. Mark Bould theorizes that modern fantastic fiction is inspired by the need to manage this relentless forced division and mutation of subjectivity through a strategy of paranoid self-construction.

But this psychic and aesthetic equivalent of deserting the Empire has limited force in sf. In its purist forms, sf ultimately places its trust in the problem-generating and problem-solving capacities of technology and the ontology of science. The more technoscientific hegemony is consolidated, the more contradictions it seeks out and strives to mediate in fiction. The most characteristic imperial fantastic forms may then be world-blends, in which the technoscientific ontology of sf is mixed with other kinds. This is a well-established element of the Japanese sf-anime idiom. In many of the major works of the genre—Neon Genesis: Evangelion (1996-97), Serial Experiments: Lain (1998), Ghost in the Shell (1995), Galaxy Express (1996)—non-realistic domains of power or styles of representation infiltrate realism, creating hybrid worlds. It is also characteristic of much French sf (whose influence on Japanese sf is considerable), for which scientific plausibility is secondary compared with carnivalesque blending and philosophical metaphor. Many—perhaps most—important works of sf violate the strict rules of scientific plausibility and introduce heteronomic realities into their stories. Arguably, this signifies that the power to manage cultural differences is at least as important to sf as the cultivation of technoscience’s mythology.

If my hypothesis is correct that the cognitive attraction of sf is closely linked to the imaginary world-model of Empire, many interesting projects may follow. It may help us to locate sf’s place in the formation of a larger ideological mythology of modernization and capitalist globalization. It may help us to see how sf mediates between the cultures of nation-states and the imaginary
coexistence of infinite variety in unbounded order. It may help us to see how specific national cultures undergo globalization; and how technology impinges on artistic culture not only as a set of tools, but as a mode of awareness. And perhaps most important, it may, by showing us the extent to which we imagine the world in imperial terms, begin to challenge us also to see the world differently.

NOTES
1. The one significant exception to this pattern is the Mitteleuropa of Karel Čapek and Stanislaw Lem. A case might be made for the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the most northern city of which was Lem’s Krakow.
2. For overviews of British sf, see Stableford, Griffiths, and Greenland. For French sf, see Lofficier, the more eccentric Gouanvic, Bozzetto, and the special issue of SFS on sf in France (16.3 [November 1989]). A serious book-length study of French sf as a whole has yet to appear in English.
3. For German sf, see Fischer, Fisher, and Nagl.
4. Regarding Japanese sf, Matthew is uninformative; see Napier on anime, and the SFS special issue on Japanese sf (29.3 [November 2002]).
5. On Soviet sf, see Heller, Griffiths, and Nudelman.
6. For a discussion of “prototype-effects” applied to sf, see Stockwell 6-7.
8. On Baudrillard and Haraway as sf writers, see Csicsery-Ronay, “The SF of Theory.”
9. Adas and Headrick are exceptions.
10. See Headrick.
11. Brian McHale argues in Postmodernist Fiction that postmodernism replaces modernism’s epistemological dominant (typified by detective fiction) with an ontological dominant (typified by sf). He elaborates on sf’s privileges in Constructing Postmodernism, where he identifies cyberpunk as the quintessential postmodern genre. I have argued in “An Elaborate Suggestion,” my review of Constructing Postmodernism) that sf is not truly concerned with ontology, since the many worlds it admits are part of the single, albeit diverse and highly malleable, immanent world of scientific materialism. To the extent that there are significant world differences, sf posits that they were either created or discovered (and hence understood and appropriated) by technology. McHale’s notion of postmodernism’s ontological dominant is strengthened, however, if we take not sf, but the fantastic as the privileged genre of the age. Fantastic fiction and its various slipstream hybrids do not require any ontological decisions about the status of the imaginary worlds. (See my review of the Marxism and Fantasy issue of Historical Materialism in this issue.)

WORKS CITED


Jameson, Fredric. “Progress Versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?” *SFS* 9.2 (July 1982): 147-58.


Nagl, Manfred. “National Peculiarities in German Science Fiction: Science Fiction as...
This essay makes a preliminary attempt to construct a cognitive map of sf as a creature of imperialism and inspired by a world-view of technoscientific Empire. The dominant historical sf cultures are those that attempted imperialist projects: US, UK, Russia, France, Germany, Japan. The conditions for sf’s emergence are established by imperialism and the role of technology, both in colonial conquest and political administration. The essay also argues that sf is imbued with the myth of Empire as a global technoscientific regime. Sf has an implied world-model, captured in aspects of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s Empire, which is treated as a quasi-sf text and a geopolitical myth, rather than a work of political analysis.