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Global Science Fiction Final: Response to *The Space Mage*

The Science Fiction (SF) genre is occasionally criticized as an inferior form of literature compared to other forms of literature because of its unique properties that can arguably pose less challenges for the author. In truth, the SF genre does have many unique characteristics that oppose for example Fantasy, but SF can, and often does encompass other literary categories within one story. This idea is called genre hybridity, a common feature of SF that blends the styles of other genres like Western, Slavery, or Horror for instance. In the first book of my debut novel series *The Space Mage*, many themes are being explored as a way of conveying the direction of our 21st Century Global Society.

For the purposes of this response essay, SF should be thought of as a genre in the “cultural form that offers an ‘everyday’ language for thinking about and responding to daily life in [the] twenty-first century” (Vint pg. 6). Throughout this essay we will use the first emerging novel in *The Space Mage* series to identify a few of the unique characteristics of the SF genre found in literature.

The Space Mage: & Samurai Mafia is as much a story about an individual as it is about a corrupt society. It uses a third person narrator to place the reader into many non-linear moments of time, slowly unraveling a mysterious scientific anomaly, and eventually asking secondary characters to make tough decisions. These decisions go to the evolution of the characters who are

well defined in the beginning of the story as their hyper-stereotypical or radical self. Throughout the story their behaviors become less predictable as they interact with other characters or are influenced by events.

The story opens with a grandiose heist scene carried out by what is depicted as a villainous band of thieves. It is not immediately clear who the reading audience should favor in this story, granting some element of a mystery in this novel. The next cutaway transports the reader to the past to develop one of the main character's backstory, Roku Tallis, during an out-of-control futuristic court scene. Already this book has dived into at least two different genres as it puts into context the multifaceted challenges the characters in the story are facing. SF, in its unique properties, has a way of dealing with person versus person conflicts separable from the person versus institution or person versus nature hurdles. Whereas person versus nature in SF might rely more on a cognitive estrangement component, person versus institution may only need to reach the novum within the story. In both cases the novum is the engine of the story because a cognitive estrangement element is considered a novum.

The novum of a story is the new idea of a story and can be a big or small component. According to the 20th Century Yugoslav author and literary scholar Darko Suvin, "SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance of a fictional novelty (novum, innovation) validated both by being continuous with a body of already existing cognitions and by being a 'mental experiment' based on cognitive logic," this definition comes as an in-depth way of arguing that the SF genre requires novums. Suvin also describes for us the concept of 'cognitive estrangement' by defining each word separately. Cognition, the science piece, deals with "the norms of any age, including emphatically its own, as unique, changeable," (Suvin pg. 7). Estrangement is the fiction part which grapples "with a point of view or look implying a new set

of norms,” according to Suvin. When put together we now have a definition for science fiction as a genre.

Space Mage Samurai Mafia establishes a cognitive framework that requires no creative imagination on the reader’s part. It is seen early in “Chapter One: The Immortal Game,” offering the moment in time in which the story is set, creating the limits this SF will be confined to. It states a specific time, locations, and even goes as far as describing the era as a time of widespread corruption, as well as the Anthropocene causing humanity to strike an accord with counterparts on the Martian world. In the fast paced opening the story serves as a critique of real-life governmental affairs painting a bleak picture for the future projecting environmental regulations becoming harder with the increase globalization.

“...[T]he entire planet operated in a form of democracy that lasted until the turn of the 27th Century. In that time family ties in government and nepotism within the scientific community sparked the interest of organized crime,” (Fisher pg. 11).

The pseudo-novum at this point in the text is the ‘Central Halls,’ which can be defined as a system of justice. It is the citadel of all bureaucratic governmental affairs, and because it is so easy to compare to a real-life concept it is not quite a novum, but better thought of as a pseudo-novum. This by itself would not entitle the story to the categorization of science fiction. To truly be science fiction there needs to be some element of a novum either found in a cognitive estranging component or a well-articulated novum. One such novum is the idea of a Martian, another species not yet discovered in real life, but described in this text. There is some aspect of speciesism that occurs within this novel; however, this is not a predominant facet of the story in a conservative read. Therefore, this novum may be a relatively small novum.

In the beginning of “Chapter Two: Sheep for Counting,” Roku and Rosale talk to each other while the rest of their crewmates are in a ‘cryosleep,’ and the differences between Earthlings and Martians begin to be discovered by the reader. It is already known that Roku is a human, and Rosale is a Martian, the conversation between the two effectively educates the reader of some of the differences between humans and Martians as well as some of the underlying problems with their cohabitation.

“Sometimes I spend some weeks in cryo,” says Rosale to Roku shortly after explaining that her species does not require sleep. She continues, stating, “[cryosleep] helps you live a long life,” to which Roku nearly insults her by implying she is already triple digits in age. This micro-speciesism is a recurring theme, though Roku and Rosale are established as friends. “I know how old I am Roku...I also have it on good authority that it is not recommended to tell a woman how old she is,” she retorts in a commanding tone (Fisher pg. 22).

SF also defines its invention of nouns, verbs, or other language as neologies, (neologisms or neosemes). These are expansions of the lexicon and only contribute to the estrangement in a story in that it fleshes out a unique reality that will require some imagination by the reader. One such example that we have already seen in *The Space Mage* series is ‘cryosleep,’ a type of neoseme, specifically a portmanteau, a word combining other words or concepts. In this case ‘cryogenic’ [as in a low temperature device], and ‘sleep’ [as in the low conscious period of rest]. At the time of this story analysis, ‘cryosleep’ is still part science and part fiction but the idea is so popular in space SF it also fits well into the space fiction Megatext. With life imitating art, suspended animation, otherwise imagined as cryosleep, is becoming a reality according to a web article recently published in December 2020 concerning the real-life NASA space program and the hibernation cycle of lemurs (Hadj-Moussa).

On page 21 of *The Space Mage* book one, Rosale explains her species cultural / genetic capability called “*solvulance*,” which is, by this point in the text, the clearest example of a neologism. It is a unique word, part of a unique language, it requires a lot of imagination by the reader further pulling the audience into this fictional world. As the story continues, the estranging features become more frequent and pronounced. The hallucinations that Roku experiences, for instance, begin to tell the main arc of the story; something on the cosmic level is brewing and will soon have an impact on all the characters.

To keep the reader’s attention and mitigate confusion, it is the challenge of this author to counterbalance cognitive and estranging events. For example, much of the text describe a society without the invention of language or imagination of new ideas. It simply describes a society separated by time. It does not reinvent the true past events of humanity, though science fiction is able to, and sometimes will delve into actual events which we should consider as a historical fiction genre hybrid. This story simply imagines a future extrapolated from real life current events. The story also uses a present tense narrative as much as possible. In dealing with events outside the linear sequence, the location in space and time is set up at the head of the passage.

In true SF fashion this book is more speculative than extrapolative to real life. It is set about six-hundred-years in the future and basically implies that our technology plateaus in the globalist society. After earth born people meet the off-world inhabitants of Mars the most significant innovation in this fictional society is an institutional one, not one rooted in science, technology, engineering, or math (STEM). As the story progresses our notion of modernity as readers is called into question. This book does not utilize many of the most common features of the space epic from the Megatext. It does not explore intergalactic transport, it does not suggest a proliferation of AI, robots, or cyborg technology, it does not assume plasma weaponry on a

significant scale. In fact, it goes against many of these tropes and largely criticizes them for being unrealistic juxtaposed with our real-life timeline.

To help the reader visualize the events and draw them into a never-before imagined story this novel distinguishes itself from other works of science fiction by avoiding common SF anticipations. It is for these reasons and more that *The Space Mage* employs contemporary language in its description of personalities, artifacts, and objects. Such as the terminology used to describe the spacecraft which is primarily adapted from mariner key words for example. The imagery supposed in the ‘Central Halls,’ is familiar to real life parliamentary venues for legal findings, exemplified by the barristers in black robes and judge displaying a Bob Wig in the first chapter. For some pseudo-novum in this section, “digital single-lens reflex cameras,” the type of camera used by today’s media in real-life, is described as “old timey,” all to create an estranging feeling for the reader while the noun described is not itself a new idea (Fisher pg. 13).

In these examples we can see that science fiction as a genre must carefully manage many of its defining characteristics to meet the requirements suggested by literary scholars like Darko Suvin. In a translation of “Art, as Device,” [aka “Art, as Technique”], by Victor Shklovsky [Victor Borisovich Shklovskii, 1893-1984], Shklovsky asserts that art is a medium that exists “in order to make the stone stony,” meaning that it adds imaginative characteristics to everyday ideas. He further describes ‘estrangement’ as a device that “increases the duration and complexity of perception,” in this way agreeing with Suvin, with the integral nature of ‘estrangement,’ within the art of SF (Shklovsky pg. 12).

Ultimately, we find that even a story that attempts to venture off from the Megatext, avoiding tropes and defeating expectations, a story is still considered SF if it meets its cognitive estranging burden. *The Space Mage* series is such a fiction as its primary focus is on the

Anthropocene – its critique on person kind’s impact on the environment - rather than lasers, beams, and robots. *The Space Mage* finds its cognitive connections in real-world descriptions for instrumentation / topography within vessels, as well as vocabulary commonly used in real-world government or politics. The estranging elements develop as the story evolves with its invention of new language, and concepts for the futuristic earth beings as well as their alien counterparts. We can conclude that by provoking the imagination of the reader while calling into question various aspects of society that SF as a genre has a high degree of latitude for inspiring new ways of thinking. Therefore, SF should be considered a high art, a superior form of literature at that.

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