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Science Fiction and the Challenge of Genre

Technological Metaphor, Utopian Structure, and the Limits of Ricœur's Hermeneutics of Fiction

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Abstract

This article argues that Science Fiction, as a genre structured by technological metaphor and utopian displacement, exposes key limitations in Paul Ricœur's hermeneutics of narrative fiction. While Ricœur famously insists on a genre-agnostic theory of narrative configuration, his own interpretive practice privileges works with genre-specific formal challenges—particularly "tales about time." Drawing on Ricœur's theories of utopia, productive imagination, and the mimetic arc, I propose that Science Fiction serves as a paradigmatic genre for understanding how fictional narratives operate as ethical laboratories. The paper unfolds in two parts: first, I construct a Ricœurian theory of Science Fiction by placing his treatment of utopia and ideology in dialogue with theorists such as Suvin and Jameson, arguing that Science Fiction's cognitive estrangement and futural form demand a genre-sensitive extension of Ricœur's model. In the second part, I analyze how technological metaphors function as productive frameworks in two exemplary texts. William Gibson's *Neuromancer* deploys the metaphor of cyberspace to dramatize the refiguration of subjectivity within digital imaginaries, while Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy reconfigures the narrative of human origin through speculative biotechnology and posthuman kinship. Across these readings, I suggest that Science Fiction not only aligns with Ricœur's understanding of narrative as a site of ethical redescription, but also compels a revision of his framework by foregrounding genre as a structuring force in the symbolic life of fiction.

Keywords: Narrative Theory, Science Fiction, Genre, Utopia, Technological Metaphor

Résumé

Cet article soutient que la science-fiction, en tant que genre littéraire structuré par la métaphore technologique et le déplacement utopique, révèle certaines limites fondamentales de l'herméneutique de la fiction développée par Paul Ricœur. Bien que Ricœur défende une théorie de la configuration narrative indépendante des genres littéraires, sa propre pratique interprétative privilégie des œuvres dont les enjeux formels sont étroitement liés à des caractéristiques génériques spécifiques—en particulier les « récits sur le temps ». En mobilisant ses analyses de l'utopie, de l'imagination productive et de l'arc mimétique, je soutiens que la science-fiction constitue un genre paradigmatique pour comprendre comment les récits fictifs fonctionnent

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comme des laboratoires éthiques. L'article se divise en deux parties. La première élabore une théorie ricœurienne de la science-fiction en mettant en dialogue les réflexions de Ricœur sur l'utopie et l'idéologie avec les travaux de Suvin et Jameson. J'y développe l'argument selon lequel l'étrangeté cognitive et la temporalité futuriste propres à la science-fiction appellent un élargissement théorique du modèle narratif ricœurien qui prenne en compte la question du genre littéraire. La seconde partie analyse le rôle des métaphores technologiques en tant que cadres productifs dans deux œuvres exemplaires. *Neuromancer* de William Gibson mobilise la métaphore du cyberespace pour refigurer la subjectivité à l'ère numérique, tandis que la trilogie *Xenogenesis* d'Octavia Butler reconfigure le mythe des origines humaines à travers une spéculation biotechnologique et une exploration de formes de parenté post-humaines. À travers ces lectures, je montre que la science-fiction non seulement accomplit la fonction éthique que Ricœur attribue à la fiction, mais contraint aussi à repenser son modèle herméneutique en insistant sur le rôle structurant du genre littéraire dans la vie symbolique des récits.

Mots-clés : théorie narrative, science-fiction, genre, utopie, métaphore technologique

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This paper joins a growing body of work seeking to apply Ricœur's narrative theory to the symbolic life of technology—understood not merely as an ensemble of tools, but as a field of meaning, metaphor, and imaginative projection.[1] Seen through the lens of hermeneutics, technology must be understood not just in terms of its development, implementation, and use value, but in terms of its symbolic and social meaning. As David Kaplan suggests in "Paul Ricœur and the Philosophy of Technology," the hermeneutic approach uncovers the narrative dimension of technology, such that we may thematize and interpret "all of the different ways that technologies figure into our lives."[2] We don't just build and use technology, we talk and dream about technology; technology figures into our stories and myths, our values and aspirations both on an individual and a collective level. This discursive field of the technological is—now more than ever—a fruitful ground for investigation.

I want to suggest that Science Fiction—as the modern genre uniquely attuned to technological transformation—is a natural place to start. In reference to Ricœur's claim that fictional narratives function as "ethical laboratories," Fernando Nascimento has already suggested in "Technologies, Narratives, and Practical Wisdom" that "fictional narratives, such as science-fiction ones, can play a relevant role in shaping this ethical sensitivity to technological aspects through an imaginative exploration of the possible consequences and meanings that new technologies will bring to society."[3] This speaks to one of Ricœur's central beliefs that reading fiction has the capacity to be transformative. While I agree that in its mobilization of technological themes, Science Fiction may prove to be exemplary for understanding how Ricœur's "ethical laboratories" function, this encounter also raises several important issues around the place of genre within Ricœur's narrative theory that are worth bearing out. In the first place, the genre of Science Fiction, in addition to being thematically determined, also seems to have a structural component that is distinctly temporal (which is also to say, temporal in a distinct way), making it particularly interesting from a Ricœurian narrative perspective. Yet at the same time, there seems to be little room within Ricœur's theory of fictional narrative broadly to explore genre specificity—and to compound the issue, Ricœur specifically names Science Fiction narratives as imaginatively impoverished.

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[1] Wessel Reijers, Alberto Romele and Mark Coeckelbergh (eds), *Interpreting Technology: Ricœur on Questions Concerning Ethics and Philosophy of Technology* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

[2] David M. Kaplan, "Paul Ricœur and the philosophy of Technology," *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, vol. 16, nº 1/2 (2006), 50.

[3] Fernando Nascimento, "Technologies, Narratives, and Practical Wisdom," *Études Ricœriennes/Ricœur Studies*, vol. 10, nº 2 (2019), 22.

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In light of these problems, I believe a larger conversation around Science Fiction and the role of genre in Ricœur's narrative theory is appropriate, especially given Science Fiction's distinctive temporal and utopian structure. The issue speaks to a tension already present within Ricœur's treatment—or avoidance—of genre-specific analysis. In the introduction to *Time and Narrative II*, Ricœur insists that his theory of narrative fiction requires no engagement with literary genre, and yet his own interpretive practice in that volume complicates the matter.[4] The novels he chooses as exemplary fiction—*Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Magic Mountain*, and *Remembrance of Things Past*—are not just structurally complex narratives; they are modernist novels in which the experience of time is not only configured through narrative but explicitly thematized. These works are "tales about time," with a temporal structure that raises them above other works of modern fiction, and Ricœur develops or adapts his hermeneutics in response to the specific challenges they pose. In this respect, my approach to Science Fiction is methodologically continuous with Ricœur's own: I take seriously the possibility that certain kinds of fiction—by virtue of their genre-specific modes of imagination—can pressure and extend Ricœur's hermeneutic model. In the case of Science Fiction, this pressure arises from two distinct mediations—technological metaphor and the utopia/ideology dialectic—which do not operate solely within narrative emplotment (mimesis II), but actively shape the symbolic horizon of intelligibility (mimesis I) and the ethical refiguration of the world by the reader (mimesis III). Ricœur himself, however, dismissed Science Fiction as a lower form of imaginative variation, most clearly in his critique of Derek Parfit's puzzling cases in *Oneself as Another*, where he claims such narratives reduce the self to manipulable sameness. By contrast, I suggest that Science Fiction offers paradigmatic cases of *productive imagination*, precisely because it displaces and redescribes the human condition through ethically charged speculative frameworks. To remain faithful to Ricœur's larger project, we must allow for the possibility that genre can matter—not as a deviation from narrative theory, but as a source of its renewal.

In what follows, I take up this challenge by arguing that Science Fiction—understood not only in terms of its themes, but also as a genre with distinctive temporal and symbolic structures—offers a privileged site for testing and extending Ricœur's narrative theory. While Ricœur explicitly downplays the role of genre in his account of narrative configuration, I show that certain genres, Science Fiction in particular, exert pressure on the mimetic arc by virtue of their structurally unique engagement with futurity, metaphor, and ideological displacement. The paper unfolds in two parts. In the first section, I reexamine Ricœur's reluctance to theorize genre, arguing that his own literary practice in *Time and Narrative II* nonetheless privileges works whose temporal form and philosophical stakes are shaped by genre-specific operations. Drawing on Suvin and Jameson, I show that Science Fiction—through its use of utopian displacement, cognitive estrangement, and historical defamiliarization—constitutes a narrative mode that compels a genre-sensitive extension of Ricœur's mimetic arc. The second section applies this extended theory to two case studies. In the first subsection, I examine Gibson's *Neuromancer*, arguing that the metaphor of cyberspace functions as a productive framework prefigured by the technological imaginary of the late twentieth century. Its symbolic displacements implicate the reader in a recursive refiguration of subjectivity, embodiment, and digital ontology. The second subsection focuses on Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy, where biotechnology and genetic exchange unsettle Ricœur's notion of corporeal invariance and enact a speculative ethics rooted in hybridity and interdependence.

[4] Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 3.

Across these readings, I argue that Science Fiction not only exemplifies Ricœur's vision of fiction as an "ethical laboratory," but also reveals how genre itself mediates between material reality and symbolic imagination, requiring us to rethink the ethical stakes of narrative in technologically saturated worlds.

Science Fiction and the Problem of Genre in Ricœur's Narrative Theory

The purpose of this section is to examine the specificity of the Science Fiction genre through a Ricœurian lens, while drawing upon discussions within Utopian and Science Fiction studies to show how Science Fiction might challenge Ricœur's genre agnosticism in ways that he himself may have anticipated, if indirectly. To this end, we need first to establish a preliminary description of Science Fiction as a genre. In the 1970s, literary critic Darko Suvin famously called Science Fiction the "*literature of cognitive estrangement*."[5] Suvin was outlining a poetic framework for understanding the unique place that Science Fiction occupies in the modern cultural imagination, while at the same time distinguishing it from other genres and traditions with which it shares a certain kinship. "The estrangement" of Science Fiction, he tells us, "differentiates it from the 'realistic' literary mainstream of the 18th to the 20th century, [while] the cognition differentiates it not only from myth, but also from the fairy tale and the fantasy."[6] This classification employs both structural and thematic differentiation, which for Suvin speak to Science Fiction's imaginative uniqueness and force; however, the formulation is difficult to map onto Ricœur's narrative theory.[7] On the one hand, there is a clear affinity between Ricœur's description of the *productive imagination* operating within fiction and this idea of Science Fiction's estrangement from mimetic realism. For both Suvin and Ricœur, the power of fiction lies in the tensive relationship between the world of the text and the world of the reader: the story produces a world that diverges from our own, in a variety of strategic ways, and that divergence opens a space, as Suvin puts it, for imaginative cognitive possibilities. Or as Ricœur puts it in his introductory lecture on "Imagination as Fiction," "whereas productive images are marginal as regards reality, it's the genius of productive imagination—of the fictional—to open and change reality" through the exploration of imaginative variations.[8]

However, within Ricœur's narrative theory, this idea applies to all narrative fiction, without regard for structural differences within various genres (folktale, epic, tragedy, or the modern novel)—nor does Suvin's appeal to the thematic specificity of Science Fiction get us around this issue. Two things, then, must be taken into consideration. First, we must amend this preliminary classification of Science Fiction in order to show that the genre may indeed be imaginatively unique, and this from within Ricœur's own hermeneutics. Second, we must see how

[5] Darko Suvin, "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre," *College English*, vol. 34, nº 3 (1972), 372.

[6] *Ibid*., 375.

[7] While Suvin's notion of "cognitive estrangement" offers a useful starting point for identifying the unique structure of Science Fiction, it is necessary to consider the conceptual status of genre itself. Genre, for my purposes, is neither a purely formal taxonomy nor simply a thematic category. Rather, I understand Science Fiction as a historically emergent, schematically distinctive narrative mode that arises from and reflects collective socio-technical imaginaries.

[8] Paul Ricœur, *Lectures on Imagination*, eds. George H. Taylor, Robert D. Sweeney, Jean-Luc Amalric and Patrick F. Crosby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024), 220.

this possibility points to certain limitations within Ricœur's treatment of genre such that the task of developing a narrative theory of Science Fiction is, in the end, justified in a Ricœurian way. For the first matter, I will draw both from Fredric Jameson's discussion of Science Fiction as well as Ricœur's analysis of the Utopian genre.

The hesitation with Suvin's classification treats the structural and thematic components of Science Fiction as co-present, but static. However, within his theory of cognitive estrangement there is an indication that these two aspects constitute a dynamic tension that, if analyzed, offers important enrichments to the definition. There is an important structural corollary within Ricœur's treatment of Utopia that is instructive in this regard. The narrative structure of Science Fiction, especially in the ways that it plays with futuristic scenarios dealing with political or social consequences of technologies in the present, already brings us close to Ricœur's analysis of utopian imagination and its relation to ideology. In his 1986 *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, Ricœur writes that ideology and utopia are "two opposite sides or complimentary functions" that operate within the social and cultural imagination.[9] Generally considered separately, as in Marx's polemical concept of Ideology or Thomas More's fantastical *Utopia*, Ricœur follows Karl Mannheim in seeing these discursive phenomena as belonging together in that they are "both deviant attitudes toward reality," what Mannheim calls their "noncongruence" with actuality or the real. Mannheim saw ideology and utopia as distinct according to the way this noncongruence functions socially—either as an orientation which diverges from reality while at the same time helping to preserve and legitimize the status quo, as in the case of ideology, or one that diverges from reality in a way that shatters and transcends reality, as does utopia.

Though he leans heavily on Mannheim's theory, because of Ricœur's belief in the symbolic structure of social life, he places much more significance on the idea that utopias have the fictional power to "break through the thickness of reality" and to redescribe life.[10] Utopias have the functional structure of dis-placement, of a metaphorical spatial slippage, or "extra-territoriality." Utopia confronts us in our particular historical position from "no-place," and from this "nowhere" "an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange [Suvin's 'estrangement'], nothing more being taken for granted. The field of the possible is now open beyond that of the actual; it is a field, therefore, for alternative ways of living."[11] Although in these lectures, Ricœur doesn't have the utopias of modern speculative fiction in mind, choosing to take up more classically practical, rather than literary, examples of the genre, the treatment of utopian narratives as a special case of the fictive imagination presents interesting inroads to further discussions of genres as structural significant.

We can see this especially in the way that Ricœur insists that the productive capacity of utopia cannot be divorced from the dynamic tension that exists between utopia and ideology. Here, Ricœur's analysis of what he calls the pathology of utopia is instructive. Both ideology and utopia for Ricœur have a negative side, a pathological side, as well as a positive. These mirroring polarities bind the two concepts together in a sort of spiral dance where what is pathological in ideology may be tempered by what is curative in utopia, and vice versa. On the positive side, ideology may

[9] Paul Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. George H. Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 1.

[10] Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 309–310.

[11] *Ibid*., 16.

function as preserving that which is best in society in the face of change; but far more often we understand in ideology the pathological conservative tendency to cling to an idealized past in justifying the forms of power in the status quo. It is in this negative sense that the curative displacement of utopia, by projecting possible worlds, may shake us clear from the cobwebs of ideology—*but* this is only possible for Ricœur if there is *some* connection to reality. If no connecting point exists between the "here" of social reality and the "elsewhere" of utopia, he writes, "the nowhere of utopia may become a pretext for escape, a way of fleeing the contradictions and ambiguity both of the use of power and of the assumption of authority in a given situation."[12]

The divergence of fiction, then, has a function that can be understood not just thematically, but also according to the way its imaginative pull arises out of a dynamic tension with our own situations. In the case of genres like more traditional fantasy, we might say that the "nowhere" reaches back either into an imagined "past" (where the medieval knight battles the dragon) or "elsewhere" (Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry), but because the imaginary worlds are based in the impossible, the stories do little to destabilize the present moment. Michael Moorcock, a widely influential author for a new generation of Science Fiction writers arising in the '70s, takes an infamously critical swipe at fantasy in his 1978 essay, "Epic Pooh" that echoes this distinction when he compares J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* to the children's book character Winnie the Pooh:

> The sort of prose most often identified with "high" fantasy is the prose of the nursery-room. It is a lullaby; it is meant to soothe and console. It is mouth-music. It is frequently enjoyed not for its tensions but for its lack of tensions. It coddles; it makes friends with you; it tells you comforting lies. It is soft.[13]

One need not agree with Moorcock's poor assessment of Tolkien or C. S. Lewis to see the value in this functional distinction—Science Fiction, according to Moorcock, should not be merely escapism or consolation, or else it loses its transformative power.

This dynamic tension is perhaps best exemplified in fiction that would generally be classified as *dystopian* rather than utopian, but this distinction is actually misleading from the point of view of a structural analysis. Coined from the etymological misstep of taking utopia to mean *eu*-topia (i.e. a good or even ideal place), and then presented as its opposite, dystopian fiction nevertheless shares in the same symbolic functions that operate in the more positive, practical utopias that Ricœur discusses. This is because in Ricœur's theory the force of a utopian displacement is *not* dependent on the alternate reality being good or bad, at least formally, but rather in how this divergence functions within cultural imagination, and in relation to ideology or the status quo. Even within Ricœur's own writing there is a sort of slippage here between the thematic and the structural understanding of utopia, where the positive content that characterizes the eu-topian world at times seems implicitly deterministic, which invites a certain attentiveness to the question of the genre. Moreover, it is in this slippage that the dystopias of Science Fiction

[12] *Ibid*, 17.

[13] Michael Moorcock, "Epic Pooh," *Arena 2. On Anarchists in Fiction* (1978), 9–10.

appear meaningfully distinctive—as the trope that certainly does not soothe or console—in their power to act as a corrective for the utopian pathology of escapism.[14]

There is a further sense in which the dynamic tension implicit within Suvin's cognitive estrangement speaks to the importance of considering Science Fiction as narratively distinctive: that is, Science Fiction does not just configure fictive possible worlds, these worlds are constituted by a particular temporal horizon—the worlds of Science Fiction are future worlds, where the experience of fictional time engages the lived time of the reader in a way that complicates the neat distinctions presented in Ricœur's mimetic arc. We can follow Frederic Jameson in pointing out that Science Fiction does not simply make the future present: its displacement takes on a "far more complex temporal structure" that fabricates here in the present the "past" of some indeterminate future.[15] In his essay "Progress versus Utopia: Or, Can We Imagine the Future?" Jameson argues for a definition of Science Fiction that locates the emergent genre within a particular historical period, this period itself being marked by an emergent attitude toward the movement of history. Science Fiction, he writes, does not give us "images of the future—whatever such images might mean for a reader who will necessarily predecease their 'materialization'—but rather [it works] to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own *present*, and to do so in specific ways distinct from all other forms of defamiliarization."[16] For Jameson, the "cognitive estrangement" given by Suvin does not on its own speak to any distinctive way in which the configuration of Science Fiction escapes the realism of verisimilitude characteristic of the novelistic form; even appealing to the thematic divergence of futural technological worlds—ideal or apocalyptic—we see in Science Fiction generally the same dedication to "apparent realism, or representationality" that brings full intelligibility to an imagined world.[17] We would do well to consider Jameson's words at length, where he states:

> The most characteristic SF does not seriously attempt to imagine the "real" future of our social system. Rather, its multiple mock futures serve the quite different function of transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come. It is the present moment… that upon our return from the imaginary constructs of SF is offered to us in the form of some future world's remote past, as if posthumous and as though collectively remembered… SF thus enacts and enables a structurally unique "method" for apprehending the present as history, and this is so irrespective of the "pessimism" or "optimism" of the imaginary future world which is the pretext for that defamiliarization.[18]

According to Jameson, in Science Fiction we see a narrative structure that, rather than simply employing displacements of time within fictional configuration, implicates the temporal

[14] For the sake of clarity, in this paper "utopia" will henceforth only be used to describe the structural capacities within utopian imagination, while any reference to the utopian as thematically "ideal" will be designated with "eu-topia."

[15] Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005), 286.

[16] *Ibid*., 286.

[17] *Ibid*., 286.

[18] *Ibid*., 288.

horizon of the reader within a dynamic and destabilizing historical tension. Science Fictions are tales "about" time, but in a structurally distinctive way.

At this point I want to return to the issue of Ricœur's exclusion of genre analysis in his theory of fictional narrative, for, on the one hand, within his framework our discussion of the distinctive imaginative capacity of Science Fiction makes little sense. On the other hand, we may see in the analysis of Science Fiction's narrative structure above certain challenges to Ricœur's genre agnosticism. In demonstrating his hermeneutics of the fictive experience of time in *Time and Narrative II*, Ricœur insists that genre classifications with regard to form or content are not relevant to the analysis of the configuration of time that operates in the world of the text. Nevertheless, the novels he selects as exemplary in this regard each, in their own way, seem to stretch the limits of his method. That is, what Ricœur seems to be interested in showing is not just that these three literary works—Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, and Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*—enact a configuration of fictional time, but rather that in being tales *about* time they engage in the process of configuration in a distinctive way. As Ricœur writes, "all fictional narratives are 'tales of time' inasmuch as the structural transformations that affect the situations and characters take time. However only a few are 'tales about time' inasmuch as in them it is the very experience of time that is at stake in these structural transformations."[19] Such a claim, it seems to me, avoids the discussion of genre while paradoxically indicating the value of a narrative theory that remains sensitive to distinct forms of mimetic production.

This speaks to a tension that Ricœur himself is sensitive to, even if he works to resolve it to the exclusion of considerations of genre. For instance, Ricœur briefly raises a similar challenge for his theory in his discussion of Mikhail Bakhtin's and Fyodor Dostoevsky's development of the "polyphonic novel." As Ricœur observes, Dostoevsky's narrative form resists traditional emplotment by refusing to subordinate the voices of characters to a unified narratorial perspective or a completed thematic argument. In contrast to monological fiction, where the author orchestrates characters and events toward narrative resolution, Dostoevsky's novels allow characters to speak in their own fully formed ideological languages. This form, Ricœur argues, puts pressure on the temporal nature of narrative because these voices refuse closure, and the novel remains "'open-ended,' if not 'endless.'"[20] Ricœur's solution is to appeal to a governing structure provided by what Bakhtin designates the "carnivalistic genre," an identifiable tradition constituted by a "matrix of plots" that restores enough narrative cohesion to prevent the text from becoming mere concatenation of dialogue.[21] This move is telling in that it Ricœur considers an extension of emplotment into the territory of genre, drawing on the logic of carnivalistic narration to preserve his mimetic arc. In doing so, Ricœur is not going so far as to admit genre distinctions into his overarching narrative theory, but he is presenting examples of narrative structures that seem to expose the limits of a theory of configuration that ignores inventive literary developments.

[19] Ricœur, *Time and Narrative 2*, 101.

[20] *Ibid.*, 97.

[21] *Id.*

Technological Metaphor and the Mimetic Arc: Case Studies in Productive Imagination

The task at this point is to show how an analysis of Science Fiction's distinctive narrative structure, by looking at a few examples in more depth, might challenge a general theory of the threefold mimetic arc. That is, within Ricœur's framework, it is not enough to argue that Science Fiction as a genre involves a particular form of configuration, for the assumption is that all variations of fictional narration are subsumed within the operations of emplotment. I have already shown in a preliminary way how Science Fiction challenges this assumption—a challenge which itself speaks to Ricœur's own preoccupation with the special cases of "tales about time." What remains is to demonstrate how it is that Science Fiction might employ unique narrative structures that implicate the imagination not just at the level of configuration, but also at the level of prefiguration and reconfiguration. My suggestion is that with Science Fiction the dialectic between ideology and utopia that generates an imaginative reconfiguration for the reader is grounded in technological metaphors—seen as "problematic" frameworks—that are already constitutive for fiction at the level of prefiguration.

In turning to these technological metaphors, we can recall Nascimento's claim that the creativity of Science Fiction should be seen as operating within both the aesthetics/symbolic and ethical spheres of our technological culture. Nascimento argues that "fictional technology narratives create imaginative variations that offer schemas of action that are between ethical universals and the contexts in which certain technological artifacts will affect our way of being in the world.[22] That is, in the discursive life of technology, we find something generative at work, out of which Science Fiction arises and which it mobilizes in a distinctive way. There is a metaphorical force within technology that Science Fiction harnesses, which we can better understand by considering Ricœur's discussion of what he calls "productive frameworks." In *Lectures on Imagination*, this productive framework, or schematism, is fittingly illustrated by way of the logic of scientific discovery. Indeed, for Ricœur fiction "belongs to the logic of discovery,"[23] and in this way he claims it shares an affinity with scientific discourse that is too often overlooked.

This logic of discovery that is shared between poetic and scientific language is pivotal for an understanding of the way the imagination operates within fiction generally. In the lectures, Ricœur explains the referential framework of fiction by way of Max Black's threefold theory of scientific "models." The three types of models, which Ricœur lists as (1) the scale model, (2) the analogue model, and (3) the theoretical model, follow the same logical development that we find with the move from the reproductive metaphor to the work of fiction as a creative *extension* of reality. With the scale model, we have an imitation or copy that presents an object in a kind of miniature form (Ricœur refers to Black's example of a ship displayed in a showcase of a travel agency); "there is only a change of scale in the relevant dimensions… of something that exists elsewhere… It refers to and shows how a thing looks. It provides help in reading the properties of the original."[24] Next, the analogue model performs an abstraction in what it represents, it is a "change of medium" wherein we read the structure rather than the components of the original; the

[22] Nascimento, "Technologies, Narratives, and Practical Wisdom," 28.

[23] Ricœur, *Lectures on Imagination*, 226.

[24] *Ibid*., 261.

analogue model presents "the relation between parts, between dimensions" (here the examples are of hydraulic models of economic systems or the energetic models of psychoanalysis).[25] This model does require more creativity than the scale model, but significantly it is the lack of true "displacement" that prevents it from functioning in a really creative way.

Real creativity, analogous to the productive metaphor or fiction, is found with the theoretical model, which Ricœur tells us "develops its own referent in the form of an imaginary object on which we read certain properties."[26] The theoretical model creates a new language, it produces a new network of imaginary objects and their interrelations that we cannot describe using the same language as descriptive analogue models. Most importantly, this framework is then "transposed" back to reality. The theoretical model illustrates the dual movement of fiction, in that it is first a departure from old language, an *estrangement* from old concepts in the creation of a new linguistic framework, that in its *transposition* back to reality is then an extension of existing semantic fields. The transposition is the *productive reference*. It is instructive here to quote Ricœur at length when he writes:

> In the theoretical model, we start from a situation where an original field of investigation has already yielded some facts and regularities but requires further investigation, because the field has become problematic… The problematic character of the situation, the fact that the regular development of observation and explanation is blocked, invites the shift toward the fictional stage. The structure of the situation demands a new device for solving the problem… In that sense the referent of the model provides a new description of reality… a redescription of what had already been described but which was no longer describable in the terms of the previous theory.[27]

Ricœur's suggestion here is that the measurement of the creative capacity of fiction is best understood in terms of the productive framework or schematic of the scientific theoretical model. There is a dynamic operation at work in the theoretical model, a drive toward innovation out of a "problematic" situation, and back again, that both echoes Ricœur's concept of utopian displacement and lays the groundwork for analyzing the ways that technological metaphors are constitutive for the production of Science Fiction narratives. In turning to a closer examination of technological metaphors in Science Fiction, I want to take up one of the few places where Ricœur treats the matter directly as a point of departure: discussion of the Science Fiction scenarios presented in Parfit's "puzzling cases" taken up in *Oneself as Another*.

Refiguring Identity in the Virtual: Cyberspace and the Metaphor of Digital Subjectivity

The core of Ricœur's debate with Parfit deals with philosophical puzzles regarding personal identity that we confront within the classic Science Fiction trope of "teletransportation" (now more commonly "teleportation"). Parfit presents an imaginary scenario where technological advancements have allowed us to teleport to a community on mars with the push of a button:

[25] *Ibid.*, 262.

[26] *Id*.

[27] *Ibid.*, 262–263.

> The Scanner here on Earth will destroy my brain and body, while recording the exact states of all of my cells. It will then transmit this information by radio. Travelling at the speed of light, the message will take three minutes to reach the replicator on Mars. This will then create, out of new matter, a brain and body exactly like mine. It will be in this body that I shall wake up.[28]

The unsettling problem is whether I survive in the replica, or whether I die here on earth—a problem that Parfit claims is undecidable. As Ricœur writes, "with respect to numerical identity, my replica is other than I; with respect to qualitative identity, it is indistinguishable from me, hence substitutable. "[29] Within Science Fiction, the teleportation technology trope can be found functioning in a variety of ways within popular Science Fiction. In some cases, the question of identity is blithely ignored for the sake of the plot as a mechanism of travel. Take, for example—to draw from film and television—the beaming technology of Star Trek, which somehow provokes no existential dread in the characters. In many cases, on the other hand, the trope functions within the plot precisely as a way of bringing the audience face to face with the terror of the "puzzling case," as we see with Christopher Nolan's 2006 film *The Prestige*.

Without referencing any such examples in actual fiction, Ricœur argues that technological fictions like Parfit's puzzling case are variations of a lower order than the imaginative variations of literary fiction. This is because, he claims, the scenarios that Parfit presents are only puzzling if we perform a reduction of selfhood, whereby "the brain represents the human being as the object of manipulations."[30] In the end, this reduction means that for Ricœur "the imaginative variations of Science Fiction are variations with regard to sameness, while those of literary fiction concern selfhood, or more precisely, selfhood in its dialectical relation to sameness."[31]

One cannot criticize Ricœur for not being familiar with more compelling Science Fiction narratives. Nevertheless, we should indicate where this critique is itself reductive, and almost certainly incongruous with Ricœur's broader narrative theory. The issue, it seems to me, is in Ricœur's isolation of the "Science Fiction scenarios" from the larger framework of the story, from the schematizing work of emplotment. If we take up the trope of teleportation just as an analytic thought experiment for philosophy, then we are not actually recognizing the full potential of teleportation as a technological metaphor. It is more productive, as Nascimento suggests, to understand "technologies as quasi-characters of historical and fictional narratives,"[32] whereby the technology is imbued with metaphorical tensions that often explicitly involve the dialectical relation of selfhood to sameness in imaginative variation.

Another point of contention for Ricœur with regard to teleportation is that the puzzle arises only within a "technological dream," as a result of some device that is "beyond the realm of conceivable technology."[33] Without commenting on whether or not the cerebral replication

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[28] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 199.

[29] Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 135.

[30] *Ibid*., 150.

[31] *Id*.

[32] Nascimento, "Technologies, Narratives, and Practical Wisdom," 24.

[33] Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 150.

described by Parfit is "conceivable" from the perspective of today's technology, it is reasonable to suggest that the utopian element in the worlds of Science Fiction become pathological if they are divorced from material and symbolic reality—the dream becomes an escape into technological fantasy. However, Science Fiction is full of worlds that contain technological variations that are indeed grounded in and generated by the metaphorical frameworks that structure our lived reality. It is when these frameworks become "problematic" in some interesting way at the level of prefiguration that they become potent vehicles for narrative configuration. This is especially true in works of Science Fiction where metaphor and world-building coalesce. If Parfit's teleportation scenario stages a limit case for Ricœur's concerns about identity, William Gibson's *Neuromancer* offers a more expansive and narratively grounded exploration of how technology reconfigures identity, embodiment, and the boundaries of the self.

In his 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, Gibson coins the genre-defining technological metaphor of "cyberspace." Rather than being merely a technological dream, cyberspace brings metaphorical gravity to the futuristic "no-place" of network technology that saw rapid technological and commercial advancements in the 1980s, particularly in the form of Local Area Networks (LANs), and which is virtually ubiquitous today. In *Neuromancer*, Gibson imagines a cybernetic future where humans are connected in a matrix of vast, virtual networks that collapse the distance and transgress the boundaries of physical space. The metaphorical force of cyberspace lies in its ability to mediate symbolically the material reality of networks (of wires, computers, servers, etc.) and the human experience of a world affected by these technologies in the future. In this world, cyberspace is:

> a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators… A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding…[34]

The nowhere of cyberspace replaces a physical setting, transporting the reader into an unsettling yet seductive world where human subjectivity is confronted with its deepest dreams and anxieties. As the characters sink into cyberspace, the reader is left to navigate the question of embodiment and identity in the mind's eye; the familiar ontological play of presence and absence is replaced by rising and receding patterns within an ocean of randomness. In "Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers," Katherine Hayles speaks to the way Gibson's metaphor traverses the experience of selfhood made tenuous in an age permeated by virtual connectivity:

> Existing in the nonmaterial space of computer simulation, cyberspace defines a perimeter within which pattern is the essence of the reality, presence an optical illusion. Like the landscapes they negotiate, the subjectivities who operate within cyberspace also become patterns rather than physical entities.[35]

The metaphoric power of this "utopian" setting captures the ambiguities and possibilities that arise when the human experience leaves behind the physical world for the virtual. The characters we meet are porous in their agency and humanity; they are, as Daniel Punday writes,

[34] William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace Books, 1984), 51.

[35] Katherine Hayles, "Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers," *October*, vol. 66 (1993), 81.

"assemblages whose subjectivity is constructed from sources of which they are rarely aware and whose elements do not necessarily cohere."[36]

I want to suggest, following, Jameson, that the narrative life of these technological metaphors—because of their distinctive rootedness in a historical present and a tension created with this present by a fictional future—cannot be accounted for within the scope of poetic configuration alone. The dragon as a metaphor for "sheer otherness" in high fantasy is symbolically rich, but ultimately "remains generically wedded to nature and to the organism," frameworks that are largely historically ambivalent.[37] With technological metaphors, on the other hand,

> the tug of war between organism and machine increasingly inclines to the preponderance of the [posthuman], in genetic engineering and in the promotion of biology over physics as the prototypical science. The reincorporation of organic material in the imagery of the cyborg or of intelligent computers, however, tends to transform the organic into a machine far more than it organicizes machinery.[38]

These images, for Jameson, emerge as metaphorical only within the historical conditions within which they are embedded, materially and symbolically grounded in the postmodern, in the modern confrontation with the "myth" of progress and late-stage capitalism. It is in this context that the symbolic frameworks of a networked reality, or of genetic engineering, become "problematic" already within the social imaginary at the stage of prefiguration—without this tension constituting the horizon of expectation that makes a narrative intelligible, the configured metaphor is in danger of losing its vitality. Each imagined future, in turn, speaks to a refiguration of the present moment that confronts the reader with the troubling facet of our technological reality generates a present that is experienced as an artefact of a certain future world.

To return once more to Ricœur's concern, we have seen that if Gibson's metaphorical use of cyberspace is a "technological dream," it is certainly not one that performs a reduction of the self to self-sameness. Ricœur makes the interesting claim that "literary fictions differ fundamentally from technological fictions in that they remain imaginative variations on an invariant, our corporeal condition experienced as the existential mediation between the self and the world."[39] But if cyberspace is a displacement of the world, it is a metaphorical shifting that opens the imagination to the very real changes in our experience of the relationship between corporeality and technology (advancements in virtual and augmented reality platforms, Neuralink, etc.). The Earth—itself a fundamental metaphor for human experience— "is the mythical name of our corporeal anchoring in the world," Ricœur tells us. But it is precisely this *anchoring* that has become questionable not only as we are confronted with technologies that may render the world inhospitable, but also as we consider the practical reality of encountering new worlds. This insistence on the invariant characteristic of our corporeal condition perhaps points to a limitation in Ricœur's theory of the narrated self that warrants further examination—at the very least, however, it certainly obscures the imaginative vitality to be found in Science Fiction. In the

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[36] Daniel Punday, "The Narrative Construction of Cyberspace: Reading Neuromancer, Reading Cyberspace Debates," *College English*, vol. 63, nº 2 (2000), 203.

[37] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 64.

[38] *Id*.

[39] Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 150.

final section, I want to take up this broader issue, the problematic status of the earth as an anchor for human existence in light of the conditions and anxieties prefigured in our technological present.

The Posthuman Condition: Metaphor and Refiguration in Butler's *Xenogenesis*

In turning to an analysis of Octavia Butler's trilogy *Xenogenesis*, my aim is to show how the interplay between the distinctly futural utopian structure of Science Fiction and the technological metaphors it mobilizes generates a paradigmatic model for narrative fiction as ethically charged and transformative. Butler's story of the creation of a human-alien hybrid species in the wake of near extinction functions as a reversal, a rewriting, of some of the oldest and most pervasive metaphorical frameworks for understanding the origins and meaning of humanity. The imagined future constructs as its past a version of our own historical destiny offered up by the technological nightmare of total nuclear destruction that has haunted the progressive dream since the invention of the atomic bomb. In the destruction of the global anchor, the invariant limits of corporeal and existential experience unravel and are replaced with various tropes arising out of confrontations with the possibility (or inevitability) of a posthuman future.

In the first volume, *Dawn*, the protagonist Lilith Iyapo awakens in captivity, having been saved along with a handful of other human survivors by the alien Oankali after nuclear war has all but destroyed the earth. The Oankali are technologically advanced, and masters of bioengineering whose primary drive is to seek out and "trade" with genetically different species. Significantly, they are not the familiar humanoid aliens who populate the galaxies of popular space fantasies, but rather are wholly monstrous, described as medusa or sluglike beings, with sensory appendages covering their body like a nest of snakes. Upon encountering them for the first time, human beings in the story are viscerally repulsed, needing time to acclimatize even being in their presence without experience abject terror.

This alien race has saved humanity with the intent of giving humans another chance at life, but only on the terms of a genetic trade, of interbreeding, and eventually the construction of a third species that is neither human nor Oankali. In the language of the Oankali, their name means "traders," Speaking to Lilith, they explain:

> We trade the essence of ourselves. Our genetic material for yours… We do what you would call genetic engineering. We know you had begun to do it yourselves a little, but it's foreign to you. We do it naturally. We must do it. It renews us, enables us to survive as an evolving species instead of specializing ourselves into extinction or stagnation."[40]

As a prisoner on an alien ship, a castaway from a ruined planet, Lilith soon discovers that the Oankali have chosen her to awaken and prepare the rest of the surviving humans, to lead their strange posthuman communities once they are ready to be sent back to an earth that the Oankali have biologically healed from their nuclear holocaust.

At heart, Butler's work engages with fundamental myths of origin and purpose, weaving into the plot devices that evoke deep anxieties over questions of how much our behavior and future survival is determined by our genetics, or to what degree we have the capacity to embrace difference and change—not just on an interpersonal level within human communities, but also in the form of a necessary evolution in the face of self-assured destruction. Through the eyes of the

[40] Octavia E. Butler, *Dawn* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1987), 43.

Oankali, who possess a near God-like ability to understand genetic composition, Butler offers a damning critique of our species. The Oankali come to call it the "the human contradiction," a deadly combination of traits so essential to our genetic code that to them, self-destruction—like the diagnosis of terminal cancer—is inevitable. Explaining the human contradiction to Lilith, the Oankali named Jdahya states:

> you are intelligent.. that's the newer of the two characteristics, and the one you might have put to work to save yourselves… [The second trait is that] you are hierarchical. That's the older and more entrenched characteristic. We saw it in your closest animal relatives and in your most distant ones. It's a terrestrial characteristic. When human intelligence served it instead of guiding it, when human intelligence did not even acknowledge it as a problem, but took pride in it or did not notice it at all… that was like ignoring cancer. I think your people did not realize what a dangerous thing they were doing.[41]

To the Oankali, this inescapable flaw is so obvious, so easily read within the human genetic code, that they first hesitated to intervene in the nuclear extinction event, assuming that humanity had come to a consensus, and had simply "agreed to die."[42] But their own evolutionary imperative finally wins over, and they take on the complicated role of both savior and colonizer, ensuring through non-consensual sterilization that any continued human procreation could only take place with their involvement.

For Donna Haraway, Butler is one of several authors she names who draw upon the deep metaphorical power of the "cyborg"—these authors are "our storytellers exploring what it means to be embodied in high-tech worlds. They are theorists for cyborgs."[43] In her *Cyborg Manifesto*, Haraway reads Butler's *Xenogenesis* as a radical intervention in the politics of identity, embodiment, and technoculture. Haraway's cyborg is not merely a hybrid of machine and organism, of biology and engineering, but a figure of ontological disruption—one that refuses essentialist binaries such as nature/culture, self/other, human/machine. Butler's Oankali similarly refuse fixed ontologies: their evolutionary imperative toward symbiosis and genetic exchange dissolves the boundaries between species, sexes, and even concepts of the individual. Lilith's transformation—genetic, affective, and narrative—is not simply a surrender of humanity but a rewriting of what counts as human. In this way, the trilogy enacts what Haraway calls "transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and contradictory standpoints"[44] using Science Fiction to imagine a world in which kinship is reconfigured through biotechnology and embodied difference. The Oankali's offer of interspecies reproduction thus becomes a deeply ambivalent metaphor: at once colonizing and salvific, coercive and generative, it stages the cyborg condition as both threat and promise. Where Ricœur might hesitate before such a radical reworking of the "corporeal invariant," Butler—like Haraway—insists that the future of ethical life demands we reimagine our embodied relations beyond inherited frames.

What becomes apparent through Haraway's analysis is the complex structure that Science Fiction affects between the prefigurative world of technological metaphors and the ethical

[41] Butler, *Dawn*, 41.

[42] *Ibid.*, 15.

[43] Donna J. Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 52.

[44] *Ibid.*, 14.

refiguration enacted by the reader. Without the metaphorical horizon of technological possibilities like bioengineering or nuclear destruction already operating in the world *before* the configuration of these metaphors within the plot, the story loses its tether to the material world, to what is ideological within a technological postmodernity. Moreover, the distinctive temporal structure that Science Fiction employs changes the way that the events and characters of a plot serve as ethical explorations, for we are not imaginatively evaluating the actions of the plots only according to the fictive experience of time presented by the story, but are rather implicated within the temporal horizon the story opens up between the configuration of fictive time and the refiguration of the present as the possible future's past. The reader is *involved* in the genres temporal structure on all sides, which invites special attention to the reader's position. Haraway, for her part, sees Butler's *Xenogenesis* as embodying her vision of the feminist disruption of stable categories: Butler's protagonists, especially Lilith, inhabit contradictory positions—black, female, human, alien, maternal, subversive—that refuse simplification. The Oankali's genetic trade and the posthuman hybridity it produces challenge not only patriarchal visions of reproduction but also the humanist assumption that autonomy and purity are ethically desirable. By emphasizing interdependence, relationality, and embodied change, Butler writes from and for the margins, aligning with Haraway's call for feminist figures who are "monstrous and illegitimate"—who can imagine justice beyond the limits of dominant categories.

What Butler's narrative reveals, then, is the ethical and hermeneutic power of Science Fiction to reconfigure our understanding of what counts as origin, humanity, and agency. Her speculative use of genetic engineering and posthuman hybridity functions not as escapist fantasy, but as a deeply situated metaphorical intervention—one that disorients inherited frameworks while remaining tethered to the material realities of biotechnology, environmental crisis, and colonial power. In displacing the Genesis myth through the lens of a post-nuclear future, Butler offers not merely a critique of human self-destruction, but a provocative rehearsal of how we might imagine becoming otherwise. The productive force of Science Fiction here lies in its capacity to narrate a future that is not simply the projection of present desires, but a mediated reflection of the contradictions we inherit. In this respect, Xenogenesis exemplifies the kind of ethical refiguration Ricœur attributes to narrative, extending it into a domain where the stakes of technological metaphor are at once bodily, symbolic, and collective. It is precisely in confronting readers with a world that resists ethical simplification—where salvation and domination coincide, and where kinship is neither chosen nor refused—that Butler dramatizes the interpretive labor Ricœur assigns to fiction. Her trilogy thus grounds the utopian function of Science Fiction not in its optimism, but in its capacity to estrange, to redescribe, and to demand responsibility from the reader.

Conclusion

In this exploration I have argued that Science Fiction deserves reconsideration within Ricœur's theory of narrative—not as a marginal or degraded form of imaginative variation, but as a genre that uniquely pressures and extends Ricœur's hermeneutic model. To call Science Fiction a genre here is not merely to assign it a thematic label or to group it within a taxonomic system of literary types. Rather, I have treated Science Fiction as a historically emergent, schematically distinct narrative form that arises within and reflects collective imaginaries of our technological modernity. This argument has been substantiated through two case studies: Gibson's *Neuromancer*, which dramatizes the metaphor of cyberspace as a recursive refiguration of subjectivity in the age

of digital abstraction; and Butler's *Xenogenesis,* which reconfigures origin and embodiment through biotechnological hybridity and posthuman kinship. These works demonstrate how Science Fiction's formal operations and futural displacements are not incidental: they constitute a genre-based horizon through which Ricœur's mimetic arc acquires new ethical and ontological stakes.

But to recognize this is also to implicate the reader. If Science Fiction serves as an "ethical laboratory," then the reading of it demands an ethics of reading—an acknowledgment that our interpretive acts are themselves embedded in historical and technological situations. These works do not merely offer metaphors for thought experiments; they ask us to inhabit alien narrative worlds that are dissonant with our own and to negotiate what it means to accept those worlds without endorsing the ideologies they expose. Science Fiction is not merely about possible futures—it is about how we, in the present, are shaped by the futures we can or cannot imagine.

In this way, Science Fiction—at its most productive—does not resolve Ricœur's hesitation about genre but puts pressure on it from within. It invites us to rethink the boundaries between philosophical abstraction and narrative form, between fiction and material ontology, and between metaphor and historical agency. As a reader and as a theorist, I have tried to show that the technological imagination, when configured through Science Fiction, serves not only as a heuristic model for philosophical reflection but also as a site for ethical encounter. The utopian horizon of the genre, far from being a flight from the real, can function as a critical reorientation toward it—a reframing of the problematic now in light of a world that is both not-yet and already our own.

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