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"But Is It Science Fiction?": Science Fiction and a Theory of Genre

SIMON J. EVNINE

If science fiction is a genre, then attempts to think about the nature of science fiction will be affected by one's understanding of what genres are. I shall examine two approaches to genre, one (genres as regions of conceptual space) dominant but inadequate, the other (genres as historical particulars) better, but only occasionally making itself seen. I shall then discuss several important, interrelated issues, focusing particularly on science fiction: what it is for a work to belong to a genre, the semantics of genre names, the (in)validity of attempts to define genres, and the connections between genre and normativity. One important but neglected clue to the nature of genres lies in the kinds of disagreements they generate over the assignment of works to genres. I conclude by explaining why these disagreements tell us something about the nature of genres, and discussing in some detail two famous cases of disagreement about whether some work or works are science fiction.

Before beginning, it is necessary to sound a note of methodological caution. I began this article with a conditional. Is its antecedent true? Is science fiction a genre? Aesthetically significant categories of artworks are abundant and highly heterogeneous. They include formal, historical, topical, political. and many other kinds of categories.[1] But which of these are genres? "Genre" is one of those terms about which there is no agreement at all over either its analysis or definition, on the one hand, or the range of things to which it applies, on the other hand. This essay

1. See Walton (1970) for an important and influential treatment of the idea of aesthetically relevant categories of art.

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itself will provide occasion to examine two very different approaches to understanding what genre as such is. As for genres, the following is a small selection of alleged candidates, drawing only from those that apply to written works: poetry, fictional prose, drama, epic, tragedy, romance, the novel, the sonnet, Elizabethan tragedy, prayers, newspaper headlines, the western, noir, and of course, science fiction.[2] In the absence of, not just agreement, but even significant overlap regarding either the analysis of the term "genre" or the range of things falling under it, the discussion of genre is maddeningly confusing. It is often impossible to say whether different theories are competing treatments of a single phenomenon or compatible theories of different phenomena that are unhelpfully using the same terminology. Without trying to sort through the confusion here, I will just state that I am intending to give a theory of *something* not unreasonably called "genre," of which science fiction is an instance. This theory will almost certainly not apply to, for example, the novel, the sonnet, poetry, or prayers, but I shall not engage here with the question of what else, besides science fiction, the theory I shall offer is a theory of. And if, at the end of the day, it is agreed that "genre" is not the best term for what I am theorizing about, things relevantly like science fiction, so be it.

1. TWO APPROACHES TO GENRE

What I take to be the dominant approach to genre I will designate the "genres as regions of conceptual space" approach. It comprises a family of theories. The driving idea behind the approach is that genres are *principally* ways of classifying works. As such, discussion of them is likely to be couched in terms of the philosophical tools deployed in thinking about classification: properties (or universals) and classes.[3] So, for example, René Wellek and Austin Warren hold that genre "puts, in a specifically literary context, the philosophical questions concerning the relation of the class and the individuals composing it, the one and the many, the nature of universals" (Wellek and Warren 1963, 237). Of the two main varieties of the genres-as-regions-of-conceptual-space approach—genres as properties and genres as classes of texts—the first is the more promising one. One very serious problem for genres-as-classes is that, according to the principles of set theory that govern classes, a class cannot change its members and could not have had different members. If a genre were a class of texts, then it would be impossible for new works in the genre ever to be written (since a given class cannot "come to have" new members) and impossible that some work of the genre might have failed to be written without that fact meaning that the genre never existed (since if the work

2. Wellek and Warren (1963, 226–37) are good on the profusion and confusion of very different categories offered as genres. Their historical survey should give anyone pause before using the term "genre."

3. Cf. Alastair Fowler (1982): "Genres are often said to provide a means of classification . . . [T]he notion that genres are classes has dominated literary theory for a very long time" (37–38). Like me, Fowler thinks this is a mistake and he agrees with the point I develop below that genres are not susceptible to definitions and that the thought that they are stems from the incorrect association of them with modes of classification. I shall not attempt to engage with his positive view that genres are types.

had not been written, the class that is allegedly the genre could not have existed). Both of these are disqualifying consequences for any account of genre. Someone attracted to the view that genres were classes of texts would have to adopt some more complex set-theoretic construction. To deal with the problem of new works, one might identify genres not with classes of texts but sequences of classes of texts (the members of the genre at successive times). Further complications would be needed to deal with the modal problem that a work in a genre might not have been written. But let us set all this aside, assuming that some set-theoretic construction could get around these problems. (I shall revert to speaking simply of genres as classes when discussing this approach, for the sake of simplicity.) Still, what is likely to be of real importance in understanding genre is not the classes themselves, but rather the existence of some expressible condition that characterizes the works belonging to the classes. This condition would be formulated in terms of properties a work would have to have to be included in a given class/genre. For example, Derrida, before going on to complicate the following, writes:

> There should be a trait upon which one could rely in order to decide that a given textual event, a given 'work', corresponds to a given class (genre, type, mode, form, etc.). And there should be a code enabling one to decide questions of class-membership on the basis of this trait (Derrida, 1980, 211).

The literary critic Tzvetan Todorov says that "genres are classes of texts" (Todorov 1990, 16).[4] But he goes on to make the link with properties when he says that

> any class of objects may be converted into a series of properties by a passage from extensions to comprehension[5] . . . Genres are thus entities that can be described from two different viewpoints, that of empirical observation [classes of texts perceived as such] and that of abstract analysis [properties] (17).

Consequently, it seems preferable to think about the genres-as-regions-of-conceptual-space approach directly in terms of properties. These properties would

4. Unaccountably, Todorov calls this a tautology. I should point out that this is not intended as a definition of the concept *genre*, or the term "genre," since, he says, many classes of texts are not genres. Later he does provide a definition on the basis of the remark: "I believe we will have a useful and operative notion that remains in keeping with the prevailing usage of the word if we agree to call genres only *the classes of texts that have been historically perceived as such*" (17, my emphasis). But of course, what a class of texts that has been historically perceived as such *is*, is after all just a class of texts.

5. This is false, strictly speaking, unless either one takes properties simply to be classes of individuals (in which case they could not play the role envisaged for them here) or one allows vacuous properties, so that corresponding to the class consisting of A and B, there would be the property of being identical either to A or B. However, the classes that Todorov is interested in may well be associated with interesting and substantive conditions satisfied by all and only their members.

serve to delineate a region of conceptual space. This is the view taken by Gregory Currie (2004), who holds that genres are sets of properties that can be possessed by works.[6]

In an earlier work, Todorov makes a distinction between what he calls historical and theoretical genres: "The first would result from an observation of literary reality; the second from a deduction of a theoretical order" (Todorov 1973, 13–14). This is not, as the descriptions might suggest, a distinction between two kinds of genres—perhaps historical particulars and regions of conceptual space, respectively—but between two different ways of *identifying* genres as regions of conceptual space. The distinction between them concerns whether a given genre is identified because it has been occupied by actual works (i.e., there is a class of works and an acknowledged property that they all share) or whether it is identified because of some more or less systemic way of dividing a larger region of conceptual space into smaller categories (a deduction of a theoretical order). Structuralist approaches to genre are highly sympathetic to the notion of theoretical genres, as evidenced by the presence in their works of grids, the cells of which represent the intersections of sets of properties. So Darko Suvin (1979, 20), whose views on science fiction I will examine in more detail next, presents us with a two-by-two grid, the rows of which represent the properties *cognitive* and *noncognitive* and the columns *naturalistic* and *estranged*. Science fiction is located in the upper right cell, the intersection of *cognitive* and *estranged*. Myth, folktale, and fantasy occupy the lower right, the intersection of *noncognitive* and *estranged*. Varieties of realist fiction occupy the cells of the left-hand column. Such diagrams present excellent heuristics for thinking of genres as regions of conceptual space.

The alternative approach to genre, which I advocate in this article, is that genres are historical particulars. Specifically, they are traditions.[7] Let me begin by saying a little about traditions before returning to genres as such. There are two distinct senses of the word "tradition." In the sense I am interested in here, it refers to temporally extended particulars. This is the sense in which we talk about, for example, the Jewish tradition. Such things have, quite literally, temporal locations

6. In footnote 4, I pointed out that Todorov does not *define* "genre" in terms of classes of texts since he thinks that not all classes of texts are genres. Currie faces a similar issue but resolves it differently. He does take *any* set of properties of works to be a genre, but gives a more complex account of what it takes to belong to a genre than merely to instantiate the properties that constitute it (see footnote 13 below). Thus, where Todorov has a complex account of what a genre is but a simple account (set membership) of what it is to belong to a genre, Currie has a simple account of what a genre is but a complex account of what it is to belong to a genre.

7. Laetz and Lopes (2008, 156) mention this view, only to dispatch it summarily: "unlike traditions, . . . genres are not defined in terms of social facts about their producers." (I suppose "their producers" means the producers of the works that belong to a given genre.) This more or less begs the question against the view I will defend, though it will also become clear, I hope, that the view that genres are traditions is not particularly well described by saying that "genres are . . . defined in terms of social facts about their producers." Mark Rose (1981, 4) says that "it is perhaps more useful to think of [science fiction] as a tradition," though he immediately goes on to gloss this as "a developing complex of themes, attitudes, and formal strategies that, taken together, constitute a general set of expectations," which is not at all how I think we should understand traditions. Notwithstanding, Rose is good on this topic and much of what he says is complementary to the views I express here.

and durations. They may last for 10 years or for 10,000 years; they are found in this place and not that. In another sense, the term refers to something abstract, perhaps a practice, such as the tradition of wearing black for mourning or of sending the eldest son into the Navy. These things have locations and durations, beginnings and endings, only derivatively, through their instances. And one and the same tradition, wearing black for mourning, might be exemplified in quite different historical contexts. The two senses of the term are related in that traditions, in the particular sense, typically give a special place to traditions, in the abstract sense. The Jewish tradition (particular) is intimately linked to a multiplicity of Jewish traditions (abstract), though it can endure while they change. But traditions (I shall always use the term in its particular sense) comprise, or involve, more than just traditional practices. They comprise, or involve, people, books, objects, places, institutions, styles of music, and many other things. These things *compose* or *constitute* a tradition. Composition and constitution are different relations (see Evnine 2011), but which is appropriate here is not important to my present purposes. I will pursue the discussion in terms of composition, for simplicity, and so I shall think of these various things as *parts* of the corresponding tradition. The exact nature of traditions will depend on, or at least be constrained by, the natures of the things that are their parts and the nature of the parthood relation.[8]

Genres are traditions that are organized, in a certain way, around the production of artworks.[9] A genre such as science fiction has many parts—readers, writers, works, practices of reading and interpreting, publishing houses, fan organizations, conferences, and so on. In this respect, it is similar to traditions that are religions. Unlike religions, in the case of genres, these elements are organized around the production of artistic works. Specifically, authors produce works in the knowledge, and under the influence, of works previously produced as parts of the tradition; the works are read by readers in the ways developed by previously produced works; the publishing houses publish such works, the conventions invite the authors, who may produce new works in the light of interactions with fans, and

8. Though, as indicated, I will not explore these issues here, I just note two features of parthood that that seem to me important in thinking about traditions and their parts (beyond the general observation that classical extensional mereology is not the correct theory of parthood for them). The first is that parthood can obtain vaguely, so that it may be vague or indeterminate whether something is part of a tradition. The second is this. Something which is, or is not, a part of a tradition at the time at which it exists or occurs, may later, retroactively, cease to be, or become, a part of that tradition. (Think, for example, of how the Crucifixion must have been a part of the Jewish tradition when it occurred but has now ceased to be part of that tradition.) In this way, traditions can remake their pasts, extend their pasts further back, and so on. It is in this light that one should consider the question of the long versus the short history of science fiction. See Roberts (2006, 37–70).

9. There may be traditions which are organized around the production of artworks that are not genres; they are not organized around the production of these artworks in the right way. For example, a given publishing house might be associated with a tradition of producing finely bound fiction by contemporary authors. Nonetheless, this tradition would not be a genre and the works it publishes would not belong to a single genre just on account of being published by that publishing house. (They would belong to a category, the category of books published by that publishing house, and it is possible that this category might be aesthetically relevant. But, as I indicated above, not all aesthetically relevant kinds are genres.)

so on. What is essential to a tradition's being a genre is that the works themselves are responsive to the tradition and, in particular, responsive to other works that are parts of the tradition. Farah Mendelsohn writes that science fiction's texts "are mutually referential, may be written by those active in criticism . . . and have often been generated from the same fan base which supports the market" (Mendelsohn 2003, 1). She says this to support her contention that "[s]cience fiction is less a genre—a body of writing from which one can expect certain plot elements and specific tropes—than an ongoing discussion" (ibid.). On my view, a genre *is* an ongoing discussion (or at least very much like one), and not a body of texts from which one can expect certain plot elements and specific tropes.[10] Genres as traditions, though, can give us some of what genres as regions of conceptual space can. Like any particular, genres *can* be used to classify if taken in conjunction with some relation that things can bear to them. Science fiction will classify works because we can easily consider the class of works that are parts of it. These will have a common property or feature, namely, the feature of being parts of the genre. It will not even be a trivial fact about them that they are parts of a particular genre. There will also, obviously, be generalizations about the works in this class, with respect to their plot elements and specific tropes, and so on. But all of these features will be derivative. Genres will not principally be ways of classifying works; they will be historical particulars.[11]

Catharine Abell gives four conditions of adequacy that a theory of genre should be able to meet.

> Firstly, which features are characteristic of the works in a given genre can differ according to their date of production. In this sense, genres have *histories* . . . Secondly, genres can cross media . . . Thirdly, a single work may belong to more than one genre . . . Finally, some genres are subgenres of others. (Abell 2015, 28)

These are in addition to a much more extensive role she discerns for genres in the interpretation and evaluation of works (including in the determination of the implicit representational content of works). I shall not engage in a full discussion of how the theory of genres as historical particulars deals with the last of these tasks since I am doubtful about the nature and extent of the phenomena to be explained by genres. But it should be obvious that the theory that genres are traditions will have myriad resources for showing how genres affect interpretation and

10. Here is not the place to go into the question of how much like an ongoing discussion a genre is but I shall say the following. I think there is a genus of what we might call interactions of which discussions (and conversations in general) are one species, and genres another. What makes an interaction a conversation is (roughly) that the elements of the interaction are utterances. Unlike some others, I do not think that the events of a work's composition or publication are utterances. (I here follow Stacie Friend [2012].) Hence I do not think that a genre actually is a conversation or discussion.

11. Not all existing theories of genre fall into one of the two approaches discussed here. Delany (1980) and Abell (2012), for example, do not. Abell (2015) may also be an exception, though I think the view might turn out to be a variety of the genres-as-regions-of-conceptual-space approach. I am uncertain about Fowler (1982).

evaluation. The same is true for the claim that genres have histories, which I shall discuss briefly later. Regarding the remaining three conditions of adequacy, genres as traditions can meet them all with flying colors. Genres can cross media. A given tradition may be organized around the production of artworks in many different media: science fiction books may respond to and influence science fiction movies, operas, comics, and so on. A work may belong to more than one genre. This is simply an instance of a single thing's being a part of two distinct wholes. And since traditions typically have sub-traditions, it seems likely that genres will have sub-genres.

2. BELONGING, DEFINITION, AND NORMATIVITY

2.1 Belonging and Definition

What is it for a work to belong to a genre, or to be in a genre? On the view that genres are traditions, *belonging* is the parthood relation, as it relates works to genres. But this says nothing substantive about what makes a work a part of a genre. The substantive conditions on a work's belonging to a genre are, roughly, these. First, there are factors on the upstream side of the work, all those things involved in its genesis. There is the process of its composition by an author, who is influenced by, constrained by, and responsive to other books, publishers' demands, reviews, expectations, and so on. Second, there are factors on the downstream side. The work is read, has influence, is judged, printed, anthologized, criticized, classified, and so on. Within the upstream and downstream factors, I single out for special mention the issue of classification. On the upstream side, I mean the classificatory intentions the author has with respect to the work she creates. That is, the author may intend to produce, and take herself to be producing, a work that belongs (or does not belong) to a particular genre.[12] On the downstream side, classificatory concerns are manifested as judgments (by critics, fans, publishers, or even the author herself, after the fact) about what genre the work belongs to. We thus have four sets of factors to look at: upstream classificatory, upstream other, downstream classificatory, downstream other. If a work were (1) influenced by works in a genre, (2) intended by the author to belong to that genre, (3) an influence on other works in that genre, and (4) classified as belonging to that genre, then, presumably, that would be sufficient for it to belong to the genre in question. I doubt there is any algorithm for determining membership in a genre on the basis of an arbitrary description of the facts falling under these four rubrics and it may, in some cases, be genuinely indeterminate whether a work belongs to a genre. I note here only that an author's intention that a work belong to a genre is surely very important to its belonging, though neither necessary nor sufficient, and that unanimous classification as belonging to a genre on the downstream side of things looks close to being sufficient for membership (if *everyone* says a work is science fiction, then it is science fiction), but is certainly not necessary. The general point here is that

12. Stacie Friend (2012) emphasizes the role of the author's intentions with respect to belonging to a genre.

belonging to a genre is sensitive to the realities of the work's history, including both the history of its coming into existence and its subsequent vicissitudes. Classifications of a work as belonging to a genre, both in its author's creative intentions and in the judgments of those who react to the work, are particularly important parts of those historical realities. This is exactly what one should expect. Traditions are, *par excellence*, social entities, their natures and boundaries inextricably tied to the attitudes held toward them by the people who belong to them.

On the genres-as-regions-of-conceptual-space approach, what it is for a work to belong to a genre is to be understood, ultimately, in terms of the work's having certain features (i.e., instantiating properties).[13] There are several interesting consequences of this. For one thing, in the first instance belonging to a genre is not sensitive to historical facts at all. If the properties that are identified with, say, the genre of science fiction, were satisfied by a work written on Mars, or written 1,000 years ago, then it would belong to the genre. I say "in the first instance" because one can always build into the properties identified with a genre some relation to particular times and places. Thus, if there were a genre of Jacobean revenge drama, a proponent of genres-as-regions-of-conceptual-space might think that one property a work must have to belong to that genre, besides the nonhistorical properties of having a certain kind of story, is being written in English at the beginning of the seventeenth century. That would "orient" the genre in history without making the genre itself something historical. But it would remain true that there was nothing essential about genres as such that tied them to history. It would just be an adventitious fact about some genres that the properties that had to be instantiated by a work in order for it to belong to the genre had this orienting function. Another interesting consequence of this approach to genre membership is that it makes it necessary that a work in a given genre have certain properties. Thus, if one of the properties associated with science fiction were (as a crude example) being concerned with science, then it would be impossible for a work of science fiction not to be about science. On the view of genres as traditions, both of these features of membership are reversed. On the one hand, genres are essentially historical entities themselves. A work's belonging to a genre will essentially depend, therefore, on historical factors—whether the author worked inside a genre, intended her work to be part of one, whether the audience of the work, including other writers in the tradition, were influenced in certain ways, whether the work was treated or classified as belonging to the genre, and so on. Conversely, belonging to a genre does not essentially depend on the features of the work, except insofar as these have

13. Currie (2004), who takes genres to be sets of properties of works, has a more complex condition on belonging to a genre. A work belongs to a genre just in case it instantiates some of the properties that make up the genre under circumstances that lead consumers of the work to expect it to instantiate others. I shall not discuss this suggestion here and note only that instantiation of (some of the) properties that make up the genre is still necessary for belonging. On another topic, if genres were classes of works, then belonging to a genre would be a matter of class membership. But since the view is only plausible on the assumption that there is some condition associated with class membership, any explanatory work that might be done by belonging to a genre would be taken over by the satisfaction of the condition associated with membership in the class. Hence, again, belonging would be understood in terms of instantiation.

particular historical causes and effects. James Tiptree's *Brightness Falls from the Air* is undoubtedly a work of science fiction. But if, by amazing coincidence, another author had produced a work similar or identical to it, but in very different historical circumstances (on Mars, or a thousand years ago), that would (probably) not have been a work of science fiction since it would (probably) not have been part of the particular tradition that *is* the genre science fiction.[14]

There is a semantic corollary to this. On the genres-as-regions-of-conceptual-space approach, it is almost automatic to assume that canonical names of genres function at least partly as descriptions of the relevant region of conceptual space. Suppose there is a genre named "Jacobean revenge tragedy." It might seem that this functions as a(n at least partial) description of the region of conceptual space that is the genre named, and hence that nothing could be part of the genre unless it were Jacobean and about revenge. But if the genre is a particular, then the expression "Jacobean revenge tragedy" might function as a proper name of the tradition, without any presupposition about what it is like. (In much the same way, the expression "Holy Roman Empire" is the proper name of something that is, as Voltaire said, neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire.) This tradition might have flourished during the Jacobean period and, as a matter of fact, have produced works that were always about revenge; but it might well not be essential to the tradition that it have existed only at that time and produced only works about revenge. So suppose the tradition had continued, and come subsequently to produce works that were not about revenge. Those might have belonged to the genre named "Jacobean revenge tragedy" without having been Jacobean or about revenge. The point is especially germane to the study of science fiction. "Science fiction," of course, has two descriptive elements in it and it is often assumed (because theorists are often committed to the genres-as-regions-of-conceptual-space approach) that for something to be a work of science fiction, it must be fictional and somehow about science. But, if I am right, "science fiction" is really like the proper name of a tradition and it is, at least so far, an open question whether a work might be part of that tradition, and hence a work of science fiction, and not be fictional or not be about science. Whether that was in fact possible would depend on the nature of the tradition.

We are now in a position to address the question of whether genres have histories. Abell (2015), as noted above, insists it is a desideratum on an account of genre that it allows for this, and I agree. It is evident that if a genre is a tradition, it has a history. Not just in the sense that a tradition is temporal entity, subject to change, but in the deeper sense that there will be comprehensible ways in which the works

14. If you doubt this, imagine its being written 20,000 years in the future, long after the age of intergalactic exploration and empires, a sort of Downton Abbey–esque work of nostalgia. In fact, Darko Suvin, whose views will be discussed in some detail next, sees these complications looming for his own approach and writes, "what would have been utopian or technological SF in a given epoch is not necessarily such in another—except when read as a product of earlier history" (Suvin 1979, 64). His conclusion that "SF is a *historical* genre" surely gets at something interesting, but it's hard to say, in the context of his views, exactly what. One caveat: As explained in footnote 8, works that were originally not part of a genre can later become parts of it, if the people who belong to the genre come to think of it in the right way.

produced at one time resemble each other and differ from the works produced by the tradition at another time. These resemblances and differences will be functions of the forces acting within and upon the genre. There may even be regularities in how genres change over time.[15] If genres were regions of conceptual space, then works occupying this region *might* still show comprehensible patterns of similarities and differences, depending on when they were written, but (except in cases where the relevant region of conceptual space was "oriented" in history), there would be no guarantee that all works belonging to a genre bore interesting and significant historical relations to other works in the genre. Furthermore, there would be a good sense in which it was not the genre itself (a region of conceptual space) that had a history, but rather the works belonging to it. Whether any sense can be given to the idea that a region of conceptual space itself might have a history, I do not know. Perhaps a genre might not *be* a region of conceptual space, but be associated with, or realized by, one such region at one time, and a different region at another time, and have a history in that sense. But why we should then think of these different regions of conceptual space as realizations, at different times, of the *same* genre would be a mystery. In any case, on my own view, genres (and not just the works in them) literally have histories in a perfectly straightforward way.

Another corollary of my view of genres and membership concerns definition. Even if canonical, descriptive-seeming genre names, like "science fiction," are not themselves definitional, it is often assumed that genres must be capable of definition. Critical work on science fiction is full of discussions of the question "what is science fiction?," where it is assumed that the answer must come in the form of something like a definition—that is, something like an illuminating set of necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be a work of science fiction. This would be an eminently reasonable assumption if genres were regions of conceptual space. If they were identified with sets of properties of works, then those properties would themselves be the material out of which a definition was formed. In fact, however, the demand for a definition of science fiction has been a source mostly of frustration. As Samuel Delany puts it:

> Inductively, we all have a pretty good sense of the "indefinability" of science fiction. In both the fanzines and the scholarly journals, we have watched definitions posed and definitions refuted. All have seemed too broad or too narrow. (Delany 1980, 176)

Delany agrees with my diagnosis of this fact when he says that "the reason genres are not rigorously definable is because they are not simply constituted of a set of texts" (ibid.).[16] Other theorists have also had an inkling of the problem.

15. Mark Rose (1981, 9–17) has a good discussion of the phases of science fiction that draws on more general work of the typical histories of genres.

16. Delany's positive view about what genres are, however, does not coincide with mine. He takes them to be reading protocols. The view is intriguing but, I believe, neither plausible nor viable. See footnote 31 below.

Noting a general frustration with the problems of providing a definition of science fiction, Adam Roberts writes that

> some critics try to content themselves with definitions of the mode [science fiction] that are mere tautologies . . . Edward James suggests that "SF is what is marketed as SF" (although he concedes that, as a definition, this is "a beginning, nothing more") (James 1994, 3). Damon Knight says that "science fiction is what we point to when we say it"[17]; and Norman Spinrad argues that "science fiction is anything published as science fiction" (quoted in Clute and Nicholls 1993, 314). (Roberts 2006, 1–2)

In fact, these are far from being tautologies, and while I do not endorse any of the three claims I am sympathetic to their general tenor. They all, it seems to me, manifest an implicit understanding of the idea that science fiction is a historical particular. But they are still committed to the idea, associated with the genres-as-regions-of-conceptual-space approach, that genres must be definable. On my view, genres, as particulars, are simply not the kinds of things that can be given definitions at all. As Nietzsche says, "Only that which has no history is definable."

It will be instructive to look in some detail at one of the most influential attempts to define science fiction, by Darko Suvin (1979). Suvin defines science fiction as "the literature of cognitive estrangement" (4), or, in a more ampliative version, "SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional 'novum' (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive logic" (63). Since my concern will be with the form of Suvin's discussion rather than its content, I will not dwell on the terms of this definition. Suffice it to say that the estrangement of which he speaks is that associated with the novum—works of science fiction, by definition, according to Suvin, involve something that is not to be found in our current circumstances, be it life on other planets, interaction with alien beings, time travel, or other such staples of the genre. To distinguish science fiction from fantasy, however, Suvin requires that the novum be treated as a natural rather than supernatural phenomenon, hence validated by what he calls cognition or cognitive logic. Suvin clearly treats these pronouncements not as widely applicable generalizations about much science fiction (as which, one could hardly take exception to them) but as "definitions," as "axiomatic," as providing "the common denominator the presence of which is logically necessary and which has to be hegemonic in a narration in order that we may call it an SF narration" (63). We can also see that Suvin subscribes to the regions-of-conceptual-space understanding of genres that goes along with the provision of definition. For when he tells us that it seems "unnecessary to reopen the debates of the medieval nominalists and realists about the 'real' existence of entities such as SF or any other genre" (17), it is because he wishes only to provide a heuristic model that "does not claim to be transcendentally or illusionistically 'real'" (17) (as, I take it, it would have to claim for it to be necessary to reopen the debates of the medieval nominalists). We are, in other

17. The quotation from Knight is unsourced and very slightly inaccurate. It should read "the term 'science fiction' . . . [means] what we point to when we say it" (Knight 1967, 1).

words, dealing with a heuristic or instrumentalist understanding of universals, but universals nonetheless.[18]

Having introduced his definition of science fiction as the "literature of cognitive estrangement," Suvin writes that this definition "seems to possess the unique advantage of rendering justice to a literary tradition which is coherent through the ages and within itself" (4). Here Suvin refers to a tradition, exactly what I take the genre itself to be, and says that the definition "renders justice" to it. The tradition is said to be "coherent through the ages and within itself"; does rendering justice to it mean that the definition, after all, merely accurately describes some facet of the tradition? In that case, what was meant to be a definition will be merely a generalization, even if it is without exception. It turns out, however, that Suvin does not consider such claims to be generalizations. For he takes the tradition (here he calls the tradition "genre") itself to be *constituted* by a common allegiance to the phenomenon of cognitive estrangement:

> this genre has always been wedded to a hope of finding in the unknown the ideal environment, tribe, state, intelligence, or other aspect of the Supreme Good (or to a fear of and revulsion from its contrary). At all events, the *possibility* of the other strange, covariant coordinate systems and semantic fields is assumed. (5)

In sum, we have a definition, something that could, in theory, apply to works from any historical-cultural context; we have a reference to an underlying tradition to which the definition renders justice; and we have, finally, an identification of the tradition itself in terms of allegiance to the proposed definition which is intended to render justice to it. The original attempt to specify what is "logically necessary" to belong to the genre, the region of conceptual space, seeks legitimation in terms of an alternative understanding of genre as historical reality; but not wishing to abandon the region of conceptual space model of genre and the possibility of definition it allows, at the last minute Suvin undercuts the pretension to historical grounding by characterizing the underlying reality not in its own terms, where we should need to speak of affiliation, influence, identity, and so on, but in terms of allegiance to the idea in terms of which the genre is defined. This situation seems to me typical of much thinking about science fiction. An explicit commitment to an incorrect conception of genre runs up against the inadequacies of the conception and an underlying implicit understanding of the correct approach, leading to methodological frustration and confusion.

2.2 Normativity

The next topic I wish to consider is the link between genre and normativity. In much traditional thought about genres, they have been taken to give rise to various

18. I am not confident I have fully understood Suvin's reflections on heuristic models but I will not here attempt to clarify them. There is some helpful discussion of this aspect of Suvin's views in Clayton (1987, 203–05).

norms or standards for judgment. But Wellek and Warren state that "modern genre theory is, clearly, descriptive. It . . . doesn't prescribe rules to authors" (Wellek and Warren 1963, 234–35). Whether or not they are right about modern genre theory, there is no doubt that critical work on science fiction is full of normative language in relation to the genre. The critic and science fiction author Joanna Russ, for example, says that "science fiction *must not* offend against what is known. Only in areas where nothing is known—or knowledge is uncertain—is it *permissible* to just 'Make [the science] up'" (Russ 1975, 114; emphases mine). Darko Suvin speaks of "valid SF" (Suvin 1979, 64), and, echoing similar ideas in Russ, is outraged by the ways in which "a simple addition of adventures . . . is an *abuse* of SF . . . which *degrades* the genre to a simpler and less organized plot structure" (79; emphases mine). Examples of such normative language could be easily multiplied.

Whence might such norms and standards spring? Insofar as genres are thought of as definable regions of conceptual space, it seems hard to see how they could generate any other than the most trivial norms ("if you want to write science fiction, give your works those features that are necessary for it to be science fiction").[19] Thinking of genres as traditions, on the other hand, opens up a whole new dimension from which to assess the links between genre and normativity; for, as Samuel Scheffler (2010) has argued, traditions generate norms and reasons for action. I shall discuss three ways, derived from Scheffler's thoughts about traditions, that genres might be the sources of norms or reasons. There may well be others. (And it goes without saying that while genres may produce norms in these ways, it is obvious that the reasons for doing things thus derived are not conclusive reasons. Authors face many pressures that shape how they write and the ones generated by genres, which will, by their nature, be reasons for a certain kind of conformity, are to be weighed against all the others, including, often, very strong reasons for trying to be original and idiosyncratic.)

One way in which genres can generate norms is that traditions are often repositories of wisdom and experience. Where a tradition is a genre, the accumulated wisdom may concern two interrelated areas. On the one hand, authors experiment and find ways of structuring plots, types of characters, styles of writing, and so on, that, in some sense it would be foolish here to try and define, work. So writers in a genre have reasons to write their works according to certain genre-related standards for artistic reasons. On the other hand, if a writer wants her work to be a success, she has reason to do what likely readers of the work will approve of. Since the tastes of readers develop in tandem with the practices of writers, genres include information for a certain kind of success. A second source of normativity stemming from traditions, and hence genres, is loyalty. To be a part of a tradition is to be part of something larger than oneself, something to which, in typical cases, one will owe all sorts of debts, in terms of one's career, one's artistic formation, one's early loves, and

19. Abell (2015) takes genres to be functional kinds and hence finds a distinct source of norms associated with them: if a genre is such that to belong to it works must achieve a certain end, then creators ought to make their works so as to achieve that end. She notes, rightly, that this is a virtue of her account as opposed to that of Currie (2004) on which genres are merely descriptive classifications. My own approach allows for a much greater variety in the kinds of norms that might stem from genres than does Abell's, but I shall not here pursue a further comparison of our views.

so on. Insofar as loyalty to something that has shaped one is capable of giving reasons, an author who has been formed by a genre has a reason to be true to it, to extend it, and to carry it on in something like the form she has received it. Of course, carrying on a tradition does not require slavish imitation of previous models and, as we shall see in the next section, different authors may well disagree over what carrying on a tradition really does require. They may differ, that is, over which aspects of the tradition so far are more integral to it, and which are less so.

A final aspect of Scheffler's discussion of the normativity of traditions that I think has application to genre is more complex but more interesting. Scheffler asks why, to many of us, daily routines are so important. His example is "ordering the same coffee and pastry at the same café each morning" (Scheffler 2010, 297). Part of his answer lies in the observation that while our relation to space enables us to domesticate some portion of it (home), our relation to time does not. In developing routines, however, we approach, as best we can, the comfort of spatial domesticity: "I domesticate a slice of time. . . . The routine establishes a kind of temporal corridor, which passes through the succession of days, and which 'belongs' to me" (ibid.). These ideas could use much lengthier examination than I can give them here. But they do point the way to understanding an important fact about at least some genres, namely those, like science fiction, that are associated with the expression "genre fiction." The designation of something as "genre fiction" is usually pejorative; it suggests the work in question is formulaic, trite, intended for undiscerning readers, and not the product of real authorial craft. But in fact, works of genre fiction are significant in thinking about genres for several reasons. One, which will become more prominent in the following section, is that they can serve as exemplars, or paradigms, of a genre. They are indisputably works of the genre of which they are (mere) genre fiction. Second, they are extremely important in the creation and consolidation of communities around and within a genre. It is those genres that are associated with genre fiction that have the strongest fan bases (indeed, that have fan bases at all) and that provide the easiest channels of communication between authors and readers.[20] A final significant feature of genre fiction, which follows from the previous, is the easy passage from fan to critic to author that it enables. These last two points mean that reasons can circulate easily among the people who belong to a tradition in different capacities.

Reading genre fiction, I suggest, serves something of the same existential purpose that Scheffler attributes to routines. The constant availability of quite similar works allows readers, to adapt Scheffler's phrase, to establish "a kind of reading corridor, which passes through literary space." And of course, in many cases, not only will the fiction consumed be homogeneous in character, and hence "routine," but the reading of it itself will be a kind of routine, a familiar half-hour snatched for oneself before the family comes home, or on the train ride to work each morning.[21] Hence the reading of genre fiction is likely to provide "a kind of

20. A good account of the formation of science fiction fandom can be found in Larbalestier (2002, 15–38).

21. This is especially evident in the case of romance fiction, where there are studies about the ways women read works of the genre in the interstices of providing for their families' needs. See Radway (1991, 86–118).

temporal corridor, which passes through the succession of days." This explains why *readers* have a reason for reading works that have certain features, features in virtue of which they strongly resemble other examples of the genre. However, if genres are traditions that include both writers and readers, linked by a variety of potentially obligation-inducing relations, it should not be surprising that some norms will arise for writers, enjoining them to produce works that have these genre-related features, because of reasons that their readers have.[22]

It is in the light of these, and possibly further ways in which traditions generate norms, that the claims made by Russ and Suvin, and others, about what constitutes a degradation of science fiction, about what science fiction ought to be like, and so on, should be assessed. Do any of the ways at which we have just looked in which traditions generate norms give us a reason for thinking that an author of science fiction ought not to mix simple adventures into the plot of her novel or story? Answering such questions would require much greater knowledge than I have of the field and history of science fiction and the nature of its readers and their reading activities. But I am skeptical that such norms would be forthcoming, so I am skeptical about the correctness of the claims made by Suvin and Russ about what science fiction ought to be like, what makes something valid science fiction or bad science fiction (as opposed to simply a bad novel or work).[23] But the important point for me is not whether some particular normative claims are correct, but the fact that people make such claims at all, and that the conception of genres as regions of conceptual space makes it hard to understand how any nontrivial normative claims about genre could be acceptable.

3. CONTESTS OVER GENRE

I turn now to another major consequence of thinking of genres as traditions rather than regions of conceptual space. One thing that genre does is produce disagreements over the assignments of particular works to genres. These disagreements can be passionate and are taken very seriously by critics, fans, and authors. If a genre were a region of conceptual space, then disputes over genre assignment would ultimately come down to two kinds. Disputants might disagree whether a work was science fiction, say, because each took the term "science fiction" to refer to a different region of conceptual space. Such disagreements would be purely verbal and entirely pointless. Alternatively, disputes might arise because, although the parties to it agreed what the relevant region of conceptual space was, they disagreed over whether the work in question fell within that region. These would be

22. Speaking with her fantasy hat on, rather than her science fiction hat, Ursula Le Guin endorses the idea that readers' needs generate obligations for writers: "Fantasy is nearer to poetry, to mysticism, and to insanity than naturalistic fiction is. It is a real wilderness, and those who go there should not feel too safe. And their guides, the writers of fantasy, should take their responsibilities seriously" (Le Guin 1979, 84). (I am grateful to Ceridwen Christensen for bringing this passage to my attention.)

23. It may, though, also be true that there are sub-traditions within the genre and perhaps the sorts of normative claims made by Suvin and Russ would be derivable, in the ways suggested by Scheffler, for works in those sub-genres.

empirical disagreements about the content of the work. Neither of these kinds of dispute captures the importance and the nature of the disagreements that in fact occur over the assignments of works to genres.

If the disputes are not terminological or empirical, what are they? I suggest that they are disputes of the same kind that W. B. Gallie (1956) is interested in, in his work on what he calls essentially contested concepts. These are concepts, he says, "the proper use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users" (158). The kinds of contests at issue are distinct both from terminological disagreements and from disputes that can be settled by empirical investigation. Among the conditions Gallie takes to be required for a concept to fall into this class is that it must derive from "an original exemplar whose authority is acknowledged by all the contestant users of the concept" (Gallie 1956, 168). In Evnine (2014), I suggested that Gallie is not actually interested in contested *concepts* but in concepts of (or terms for) contested things, namely, traditions. The reference to the "original exemplar" is to an earlier stage of a tradition, or to some earlier person, thing, work, or event that belongs to the tradition. What the contestants are disputing is which one of them is the true "heir" to that exemplar, which one of them represents the authentic development of the tradition. In most cases, there is no right answer to such disputes. They are like, and in many cases may actually be, disputes over power. Where the agreed-on exemplars are complex in nature, it is likely that each of the disputants is responding to different features of it and treating fidelity to those features as necessary for "carrying on in the same way." These contests are not, strictly, essential to traditions, but given the complex and important roles traditions play in our lives, they are endemic to them. (Thus, Gallie's theory would have been better called a theory of concepts for endemically contested entities rather than of essentially contested concepts.)[24]

If genres are traditions, then we should expect disagreements about genres of the kind that characterizes most traditions. This, it seems to me, is exactly what happens when people dispute the assignments of works to genre. The disputants are actually contesting not, principally, over a matter of classification but over their conception of the tradition. To argue that a work belongs to a genre is to make a plea that it be taken up, acknowledged, discussed by one's fellow tradition-members, read and interpreted in the light of previous works in the genre, anthologized, and, perhaps most importantly, be taken into account and looked to as a source of influence in future works. To argue to exclude a work from a genre is, accordingly, to make a plea that it be ignored by the tradition, that its influence be muted or nullified altogether, that future works not resemble it in certain ways or follow in its direction, that it not be read and evaluated in the light of other works from that genre. It is, however, characteristic of such disputes, as it is characteristic of the disputes that Gallie himself was explicitly interested in, that they often disguise themselves as disputes about definition.

24. Some elements of my interpretation of Gallie were anticipated, unbeknownst to me, by David-Hillel Ruben (2011, 2013).

I propose to illustrate the importance of disputes over assignments to genre, and the ways in which they interact with the other issues which we have examined, by looking at two cases where there has been substantial disagreement over the assignment to the genre of science fiction of some particular work or works.[25] It is absolutely not my goal here to render judgment on whether the works in question are, or are not, science fiction. It is merely to look closely at the disputes to gain insight into the nature of genre in general, and science fiction in particular.

3.1 Margaret Atwood

Margaret Atwood has authored several novels the status of which as science fiction has been contested. *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is the earliest. It is a near-future dystopia in which women are severely oppressed by a Christian theocracy. In the face of widespread fertility problems, a class of women—"handmaids"—able to reproduce is kept in concubinage. Later came the three works of the MaddAddam trilogy: *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013). They are also near-future dystopias, set in a world that has been radically transformed by genetic engineering and pandemic and catastrophic climate change.[26] Many people take these works as examples of science fiction. (The first won the Arthur C. Clarke award for science fiction in 1987; the last, the Goodreads Choice for Best Science Fiction in 2013.) Yet, notoriously, Atwood herself demurred: science fiction, she claimed, is "fiction in which things happen that are not possible today—that depend, for instance, on advanced space travel, time travel, the discovery of green monsters on other planets or galaxies, or which contain various technologies we have not yet developed" (Atwood 2005, 92).[27] By these criteria, Atwood argued, her work is not

25. Adam Roberts (2006, 21) notes that "much of the critical discussion about SF, for instance online, worries away obsessively about what is and what isn't 'proper' science fiction," but he attributes this to the influence on science fiction criticism of structuralism and so sees it as a distinctive phenomenon rather than a feature of genre in general. I have two comments on this. First, I noted above the affinity structuralism has for the regions-of-conceptual-space approach to genres. Here we see Roberts drawing the appropriate conclusion ("it is rather dispiriting to see so many SF critics labouring so strenuously to establish a 'pure race' model of what SF is" [ibid.]) that would follow *if* that model of genre were correct. I would say that, given a better conception of genre, at least some of the contests may seem less dispiriting. Second, it would be somewhat damaging (though far from fatal) to my claim that genres are traditions if this feature of Gallie-like contests were confined only to science fiction, or were vastly more prevalent there. But given the well-known involvement of the fan base of science fiction in the discourse about it, it would not be at all surprising to see a somewhat greater incidence of such genre-classification contests concerning that particular genre.

26. It is difficult synthesizing the various interventions in this ongoing debate because they were made at different times (as the works were being published) and do not always apply to the same works. Also, one ought to distinguish, as the disputants themselves do not, between *The Handmaid's Tale*, on the one hand, and the trilogy, on the other hand.

27. The quote is from "Writing Utopia," a previously unpublished speech delivered in 1989, and the demurral was with reference to her novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. However, Atwood has continued to appeal to such considerations with respect to the works of the trilogy.

science fiction; she opted instead to describe it as "speculative fiction." The science fiction world responded to her demurral with outrage. Peter Watts wrote that Atwood "is a woman so terrified of sf-cooties that she'll happily redefine the entire genre for no other reason than to exclude herself from it" (Watts 2003, 4). Atwood's friend, Ursula Le Guin, made essentially the same point, more nicely: Atwood's "arbitrarily restrictive definition seems designed to protect her novels from being relegated to a genre still shunned by hidebound readers, reviewers and prize-awarders. She doesn't want the literary bigots to shove her into the literary ghetto" (Le Guin 2009). Atwood rejected the imputed motives and tried to resolve the disagreement, at least with Le Guin, by noting that "what Le Guin means by 'science fiction' is what I mean by 'speculative fiction,' and what she means by 'fantasy' would include some of what I mean by 'science fiction.' So that clears it all up, more or less" (Atwood 2011, 7).

This is a model disagreement of the kind I am interested in. It is framed almost entirely in terms of definition. Atwood provides one (as we shall see below, one not far from Darko Suvin's); her opponents take her to task for invoking a *defective* definition but seem to think there is a good one in the offing; Atwood responds with a humorous attempt to make it all about terminology. If she is right, the whole dispute would end up looking pretty silly! There is, therefore, a striking contrast between the manifest content of the dispute and the seriousness with which it is conducted. Without penetrating to the latent content, one might well, with Adam Roberts (2006, 21), find the whole thing "dispiriting."

Before looking more closely at the terms of the dispute, we may note that one thing it illustrates is that when it comes to the question of whether a work belongs to a genre, an author's opinion that it does not belong is not sufficient for it not to belong. If it were, there could be no controversy in this case. As I argued above, the author's application of (or here, refusal to apply) a genre concept in the composition of a work is only one of the parameters determining genre membership, the others being other forms of influence on the upstream side, and both influence and classification on the downstream side; and by itself, it is neither necessary nor sufficient for the work to belong (or not belong) to a given genre. Notwithstanding, Ursula Le Guin, while not exactly going against her judgment that the work (in this case *The Year of the Flood*) is science fiction, does take herself to be constrained by Atwood's pronouncements:

> I feel obliged to respect her wish [not to call the novel science fiction], although it forces me, too, into a false position. I could talk about her new book more freely, more truly, if I could talk about it as what it is, using the lively vocabulary of modern science-fiction criticism, giving it the praise it deserves as a work of unusual cautionary imagination and satirical invention. As it is, I must restrict myself to the vocabulary and expectations suitable to a realistic novel, even if forced by those limitations into a less favourable stance. (Le Guin 2009)

In fact, it is entirely unclear why Le Guin should feel herself so constrained in this way. If the novel is, as she says, science fiction, why can she not review it as

such?[28] Is it mere politeness that stops her? I speculate that perhaps Le Guin does feel that the author can determine, by herself, a work's genre, and that she is unhappy with Atwood not for refusing to *call* her works "science fiction," but for refusing to *make* them science fiction.

I have argued that disputes such as the one between Atwood and her critics are not really definitional at all, but rather disputes about how to conceive of a tradition and one's relation to it; however, they nonetheless have a tendency to disguise themselves as disputes about definitions. Let us, therefore, look a little at the manifest content of the dispute before turning to its latent content. Science fiction, Atwood says, is "fiction in which things happen that are not possible today—that depend, for instance, on advanced space travel, time travel, the discovery of green monsters on other planets or galaxies, or which contain various technologies we have not yet developed." This corresponds pretty closely to Darko Suvin's definition of science fiction as the literature of cognitive estrangement. Atwood's insistence on the "not possible today" echoes Suvin's emphasis on the novum (providing the estrangement). Atwood also picks up on Suvin's "cognitive" since her "not possible *today*" is completed by "technologies we have *not yet* developed" (but may one day, as opposed to the elements of fantasy and fairy tale which are not possible today and never will be). I have two points to make about this. First, given the similarity to Suvin's influential definition, why is Atwood accused of *redefining* science fiction, or of offering an arbitrarily restrictive definition? Her critics do not specify, but I suppose it is because "things happen that are not possible today" is immediately tied by Atwood to technological matters. In *The Handmaid's Tale* there is nothing technologically impossible by the standards of the time at which the novel was written, but there is a novum nonetheless: a new kind of social order. In effect, Atwood is ignoring the changes in science fiction started by the New Wave in the 1960s and spurred forward by the growth of feminist science fiction in the 1970s which broadened a previously exclusive focus on the "hard" sciences to encompass the social sciences, biology, and linguistics.[29] She is implying that much that has, sometimes enthusiastically and sometimes grumblingly, been taken up into the tradition of science fiction should also be rejected.

The second comment on Atwood's definition is this. Her definition functions in two distinctions. One contrasts science fiction with speculative fiction—"things that really could happen but just hadn't completely happened when the authors

28. Nor is Le Guin fair to Atwood's position since Atwood calls her works "speculative fiction" and distances them, no less than science fiction, from realist novels.

29. Here is one place where the disputants (including Atwood herself) ought to pay more attention to the differences among Atwood's disputed novels. The MaddAddam trilogy might well be thought to qualify even under her own understanding of her definition. Certainly it is not currently possible to accomplish the kind of bio-engineering displayed in the Crakers, the post-humans that we meet in those novels. Another point at which the distinction seems to want paying attention to is when Atwood approvingly refers to a fan who takes science fiction to include "space ships and mad scientists and Experiments Gone Awfully Wrong" (quoted in Atwood 2011, 3). Mad scientists and Experiments Gone Awfully Wrong comes close to counting *Oryx and Crake* in, though *The Handmaid's Tale* out.

write the books" (Atwood 2011, 6). The other contrasts science fiction and fantasy. Describing an encounter between Atwood and Le Guin, Claire Evans (2010) reports that "[t]hey agreed that the key distinction between fantasy and science fiction was one of possibility: fantasy could never happen, while science fiction could." These definitions, and the accompanying attempts at deductions of a theoretical order (to echo Todorov), are based on features of the works classified, specifically, whether what they represent is possible or not, and if possible, whether possible relative to current or only future technology. As such, they are surely hopeless, as only a little reflection will reveal. Stories involving faster than light travel represent things that our best science tells us could not happen; no such work, then, could be science fiction. The same goes for most stories depicting time travel. The facts about what is absolutely possible would upend a huge amount of undisputed genre classification, if they are knowable at all. And facts about what is possible relative to a given stage of technology are so context-bound that they will provide almost no undisputed classifications. For example, if a novel depicts aliens with advanced technology invading a contemporary earth, whose technology should the novel be judged relative to? Ours or that of any actual potential invading aliens out there? But even if all that was settled, do we really want to hold that whether a work is realist novel, a work of speculative fiction, an example of science fiction, or fantasy depends on how fast a spaceship in it travels?

The dispute, taken on its own terms, looks futile and unilluminating, a game of passing labels around on the basis of dubious content pumped into them by out-of-place definitions. What, then, is really going on? In the course of elaborating the distinction between science fiction and speculative fiction, Atwood writes:

> What I mean by "science fiction" is those books that descend from H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, which treats of an invasion by tentacled, blood-sucking Martians shot to Earth in metal canisters—things that could not possibly happen—whereas for me, "speculative fiction" means plots that descend from Jules Verne's books about submarines and balloon travel and such—things that really could happen but just hadn't completely happened when the authors wrote the books. (Atwood 2011, 6)

Here, the distinction in terms of content is not primary, but derived from another quite different distinction, a distinction of lineage, indicated by the expression "descended from." This implies the existence of material relations of influence, just the kind of thing I subsume under tradition. And this language occurs elsewhere in Atwood's discussion as well. Speaking of her desire to exclude from counting as science fiction such things as "common and garden-variety devils, and demonic possession, and also vampires and werewolves," she notes that such things "have literary ancestries . . . all their own" (Atwood 2011, 3). As with Suvin's definition of science fiction, which we saw was inextricably bound up with a desire to "render justice" to a literary tradition, we seem to have here an intertwining of considerations of content and considerations of lineage. The definitional parts are intended to describe, to "render justice," to the lineages or traditions. Atwood does not make the same, final undermining move to this

intertwining that Suvin does. That move would be to understand the relation of "descent" simply in terms of common interest in, respectively, "things that could not possibly happen" and "things that really could happen but just haven't completely happened when the authors write the books." But nor does she seek to fill in the claim of descent in genuine, material terms. Was she actually inspired by Verne (and not Wells) in writing her books? Was she "in conversation" with one and not the other? She doesn't say.

In a striking and helpful passage, Gwyneth Jones (1999, 4) writes:

> Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is so similar to genre feminist sf of the mid-1970s that whole chapters could be lined up together sentence by sentence to "prove" that the one must be the cause or inspiration of the other. But didactic fantasy—Utopian or "Dystopian"—has a long history, and its links with sf might best be regarded as a case of convergent evolution.

Although just prior to this, Jones described *The Handmaid's Tale* as a case of science fiction by a "mainstream writer," this paragraph effectively undercuts that judgment for reasons consonant with Atwood's talk of descent. Jones says that Atwood's work might strongly resemble, in content, undisputed works of science fiction and yet still belong to a different "species," just as two animals might have strongly resembling features without being related. Genre classification, this suggests, is like assignment to a species. Appeals to what an animal or a work is like might be heuristic. But the reality of convergent evolution means that animals or works may resemble each other in various ways and yet belong to different species or genres. What makes an animal or work belong to a species or genre are facts about its history and not what it is like.

Genres have as parts not just works, authors, and critics, but also fans and general readers, and their role is also a concern in Atwood's refusal to classify her works as science fiction. In a very brief piece in the *New Scientist*, Atwood (2008) describes an encounter with Randy-at-the-bank who she thinks is "representative" in his opinion, though she does not say representative of what. Atwood says that she knew Randy was a science fiction fan because he said he liked *Oryx and Crake*. So she seems to be acknowledging that fans in general take *Oryx and Crake* to be a work of science fiction. We noted above that the author's own classification of her work is neither necessary nor sufficient to assign it to a genre. Here, Atwood seems to indicate that a large consensus on the part of readers that a work belong to a given genre is not sufficient. I suggested above that a unanimous agreement that a work belongs to a genre is probably sufficient for belonging. Though unanimity is clearly lacking in this case, Atwood's insistence that her works are not science fiction, in the face of her acknowledgement that both fans and knowledgeable critics like Le Guin and Watts take them to be science fiction, is certainly uncomfortable.

Also in connection with readers, Atwood stresses how book covers given to previous books of hers created false expectations in readers. *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* looked like Harlequin romances, and *The Robber Bride*, in translations for Soviet-bloc countries, like pornography:

> Having thus misled readers twice—inadvertently—by dint of book covers and the genre categories implied by them, I would rather not do it again . . . [B]eing unable to produce [space creatures in my books], I don't want to lead the reader on, thus generating a frantic search within the pages—*Where are the Lizard Men of Xenor?*—that can only end in disappointment. (Atwood 2011, 4)

Atwood is surely being disingenuous here and one cannot help feeling some sympathy with Watts's claim that Atwood is afraid of SF-cooties and Le Guin's verdict that Atwood "doesn't want the literary bigots to shove her into the literary ghetto," a ghetto teeming with Lizard Men of Xenor (in fact, an arch reference to a self-contained story by a character in one of Atwood's nonspeculative fiction pieces, *The Blind Assassin*). Atwood must know as well as anyone that there is plenty of "literary" (rather than genre) science fiction out there and that as long as her books don't have pictures of Lizard Men on their covers, no one would be condemned to frustration if she accepted that her works were science fiction. Her insistence on maintaining that they are not science fiction is surely, therefore, at least in part a matter of wanting to choose the company she keeps. And Randy-at-the-bank may be a good fellow, but he is, after all, representative, and representativeness is exactly what *genre* fiction is about, and what *literary* authors fight against.

3.2 Pamela Zoline and "The Heat Death of the Universe"

Pamela Zoline's story "The Heat Death of the Universe" (Zoline 1967) unfolds in 54 numbered paragraphs. Most of them detail, in a detached and alienating way, the thoughts and characteristics of an educated, middle-class, California housewife, Sarah Boyle, and her activities on one particular day that include cleaning the house, preparing for and throwing a birthday party for one of her children, and, finally, having a breakdown in which she hurls the contents of her kitchen around in desperation, hugely increasing the disorder she has been fighting against all (and every) day. Interspersed among these are some paragraphs that deal with philosophy, art, and especially, entropy and the heat death of the universe. These paragraphs sometimes clearly reflect or tie in with Sarah's thoughts. The work deals with concerns of second-wave feminism, the loneliness of the housewife (her husband is conspicuously absent throughout), the drudgery of her ungratifying work in the house, the lack of scope for her obvious artistic, scientific, and philosophical talents. It also clearly deals with science, reflecting the widespread interest in entropy among the New Wave writers of the 1960s, but also, as Mary Papke (2006, 152) points out, presenting itself as a scientific piece of writing, a lab report, with definitions, axioms, and so on.

The contest over the genre of Zoline's story is the reverse of that in the Atwood case. Zoline herself published the story in *New Worlds*, formerly a pulp science fiction magazine but taken over and remade by Michael Moorcock as a flagship of the New Wave in 1964. The story has been reprinted a number of times in science fiction anthologies, presumably with the consent and approval of its

author. So the author, apparently, is happy with the work's being considered science fiction. The doubters come from among critics. Mark Rose (1981, 1) describes the work as "an interesting piece of fiction, and one that clearly gains resonance and impact by having been published in a context of science-fiction expectations" but goes on immediately to ask, "but is it science fiction?"[30] (Rose answers his own question with a weak "sort of," suggesting the model of an alien body-snatcher plot with entropy playing the role of alien.) David Ketterer (1974, 187) is less tentative:

> to relate the ennui of a suburban housewife to the entropy of the universe . . . is to use a science-fictional conception only for its metaphoric appropriateness. Because the tale's reality is grounded in a housewife and her kitchen and because of the lack of a plausible scientific rationale connecting the end of the material universe with her state, Zoline's piece cannot legitimately be classified as science fiction.

Finally, Paul Kincaid (2011) writes that the story has "become virtually the defining new wave story, but it raises one interesting question: is it science fiction?" On the one hand, "[i]f science fiction purely lies in the application of any of a set of commonly recognised tropes or characteristics—space travel, aliens, robots, the future—then 'The Heat Death of the Universe' is not science fiction." On the other hand, it is "perverse" to claim the work is not science fiction, given where it was originally published. Kincaid's "solution" to this conundrum is to invoke Samuel Delany's idea that a genre is a reading protocol and so does not reside in the text itself. But he himself is hardly convinced and his essay finishes thus: "The story is not science fiction, but the protocols I use to read the story most certainly are . . . Does that make it science fiction?"[31]

The case for exclusion, once again, seems to rest on the acceptance of some kind of necessary conditions pertaining to a work's content (a definition of a genre, in the sense I have been interested in here) for it to count. There is science in the work, to be sure. But it seems that, according to Ketterer, not only must science-y stuff be present in a story, it must be connected in a certain way to the rest of the narrative content. In particular, it cannot merely sit there, the heat death of the universe as inert metaphor for the housewife's battle against grime and clutter! Although, to the best of my knowledge, Suvin has not pronounced on the story, Elizabeth Hewitt conjectures that, given its lack of a novum, "it seems unlikely that Suvin would include 'Heat Death' in his own generic definition of sf" (Hewitt 1994, 293), though she makes the excellent point that, from the standpoint of the typical science fiction fan of the time, the account of Sarah Boyle's day might well appear as an estrangement-producing novum (ibid., 292)!

30. I had already fixed on the title of my article and decided to write about Zoline's story before I came upon this happy quotation!

31. The answer to his question must surely be "no," which points to the fundamental weakness of Delany's idea that genres are reading protocols, that it gives no way of understanding what it is for a work as such to belong to a genre. Any work *can* be read *as* science fiction; no work *must* be read that way.

The case for the story's inclusion in science fiction, by contrast, stems from the kind of considerations I have discussed under the rubric of tradition. Kincaid thinks we wouldn't even be considering the question of whether the story was science fiction had it not been published in *New Worlds* and that given that it was first published there, it would be "perverse" to deny it the status of science fiction. Zoline herself says that she "ran with a bad crowd in London including Tom Disch, John Clute, Mike Moorcock, John Sladek, Jimmy Ballard" (all well-known science fiction writers) and acknowledges that this "gave a certain neighborhood for my stories" (quoted in Papke 2006, 146). (I assume the neighborhood in question is that of a particular variety of science fiction and her point is that the story's genre is affected by the facts of who she "ran with.")

If we take a step back, however, we can see that there may be two undercurrents at work that reflect different struggles over the direction of science fiction as a tradition. When the New Wave began in the 1960s, it encountered a high degree of resistance from traditional quarters in the science fiction world. Among other charges laid against it was the experimental nature of the writing and the interiorization of its themes (the famous reorientation from outer space to inner space). Both these characteristics are to be found in Zoline's story which, as Kincaid says, has become "virtually the defining new wave story." Doubts about its status as science fiction are therefore, in some degree, metonymic for doubts about the direction as a whole of the "neighborhood" in which the story is located. Science fiction, Ketterer (along with other critics of the New Wave) seems to suggest, should not let the role of science become one merely of metaphor.[32] We can (in an oversimplified and schematic way) postulate that both proponents and critics of the New Wave will acknowledge an array of exemplars of science fiction and that these exemplary works will accomplish at least two things. They will give a nonmetaphoric role to science-related themes of space exploration, aliens, time travel, and so on. And they will explore themes of alienation and difference. Critics of the New Wave took the first, but not the second, to be essential to the tradition. The New Wave, by contrast, took the second but not the first to be its defining feature. The contest over Zoline's story is thus part of a broader contest over which features of the tradition thitherto should be taken as essential to it, and hence which of the parties, the conservatives or the insurgents, should be taken as truly continuing the tradition.

One might wonder whether Zoline's story hasn't become "virtually the defining new wave story" simply because it has become totemic in precisely the context of asking "what is science fiction?" And so one might well wonder why it, a rare story by a woman in a movement dominated by men (Ballard, Aldiss, Moorcock, Ellison, and others), has achieved that dubious honor. Is it, itself, a more doubtful specimen of science fiction than, say, Ballard's "The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered as a Downhill Motor Race"? Here we come to the second larger historical current that seems to be involved. In the 1940s and 1950s,

32. Whether that is what is going on in Zoline's story is something I shall not discuss, except to say that I rather doubt the usefulness of the concept *metaphor* for understanding the phenomena here.

a sub-genre of science fiction flourished that has been called "housewife heroine" science fiction. The expression "housewife heroine" was coined by Pamela Sargent, who was dismissive of these female-authored, but apparently nonfeminist works in which the lead characters were "usually passive or addlebrained and solved problems inadvertently, through ineptitude, or in the course of fulfilling their assigned roles in society" (Sargent 1975, xxiii). In fact, housewife heroine fiction has recently been undergoing a reevaluation, thanks to the work of a later generation of feminist scholars such as Justine Larbalestier (2002) and Lisa Yaszek (2003, 2006). But the relevant point is that, as Papke (2006, 148) rightly notes, Zoline's story itself is an extension of the sub-genre into the era of second-wave feminism.

While Sargent was dismissive of housewife heroine fiction because it was not radical enough, conservative forces within the science fiction world were dismissive of it because, merely by refocusing on women in a domestic situation, the sub-genre was too radical. As Lisa Yaszek explains:

> conservative members of the SF community (male and female alike) disparaged housewife heroine fiction as "heartthrob-and-diaper" storytelling produced by a "gaggle of housewives" out to spoil SF for everyone. As the references to romance and child-rearing suggest, such fans were convinced that housewife heroine SF was bad SF precisely because *it wasn't really SF at all*; instead, it was merely a variation on a seemingly far more mundane kind of prose: women's magazine fiction. (Yaszek 2006, 79; my emphasis)

(See also Larbalestier 2002, 172–73.) Quite apart, then, from the experimental nature of the writing and the problematic relation between science and the rest of the narrative, Zoline's story is already under a cloud of suspicion, owing to the history of attempts to keep the science fiction tradition free from the contaminating influences of femininity and domesticity. Here we see a struggle over the direction of a tradition which is more nakedly about power and control than that involved over the arrival of the New Wave. The increasing numbers of female authors and the increasing prominence of "feminine" themes were seen by some as a threat to the integrity of a tradition the "maleness" of which was, according to those threatened, essential to its identity.

And what of that feminine domesticity in Zoline's story? In a fascinating treatment of the story, Elizabeth Hewitt notes that as a housewife, Sarah Boyle "segregates and maintains the categories of clean/dirty and raw/cooked . . . [H]ousework is a project of classification" (Hewitt 1994, 294). The story also dwells at length on Sarah's efforts to label, classify, and count various things in her environment. Hewitt thus reads the story itself as being about genre, specifically, the New Wave's concerns regarding its own relation to the genre of science fiction. Michael Moorcock took over *New Worlds* in 1964. It had originally been a pulp magazine of the sort common from the golden age of science fiction. The magazine's subtitle changed, in the course of only a few years, from "science fiction" to "speculative fiction" to "fiction" to nothing at all, in service to Moorock's vision of it as a "platform [from] which [the authors in his circle] could expand out of the genre into doing things that were personal for them" (Moorcock, quoted in Hewitt

1994, 299). In this context, Hewitt understands the heat death of the universe in two ways. If the boundaries of genre are tightly controlled, new works will closely resemble previous works, quickly using up the possible room for variation. The genre will thus be exhausted by repetition. As Sarah thinks, of the offspring she has generated:

> there are things to be hoped for, accomplishments to be desired beyond the mere reproduction, mirror reproduction of one's kind. . . . The wooden Russian doll has bright, perfectly round red spots on her cheeks, she splits in the centre to reveal a doll smaller but in all other respects identical with round bright red spots on her cheeks, etc. (Zoline 1967, ¶32)

On the other hand, the loss of generic distinctions altogether is the victory of entropy in the literary field. Members and fellow travelers of the New Wave were highly ambivalent about the loss of specificity for their work under the general heading of Literature, even as they strove to make science fiction more literary. Genre allowed science fiction an insurgent, outsider status that the New Wave valued. They thus needed some understanding of genre that would be free enough to allow them to "do things that were personal for them," while preserving some sense of identity and otherness with respect to the mainstream. Hewitt finds Zoline gesturing at a fluid concept of genre through Sarah Boyle's hope that

> while the Universe as a whole . . . tends to run down, there are local enclaves whose direction seems opposed to that of the Universe at large and in which there is a limited and temporary tendency for organization to increase. Life finds its home in some of these enclaves. (Zoline 1967, ¶49)

I conclude with the observation that "a local enclave with limited and temporary tendencies for organization to increase" is not a bad description of a tradition.[33]

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