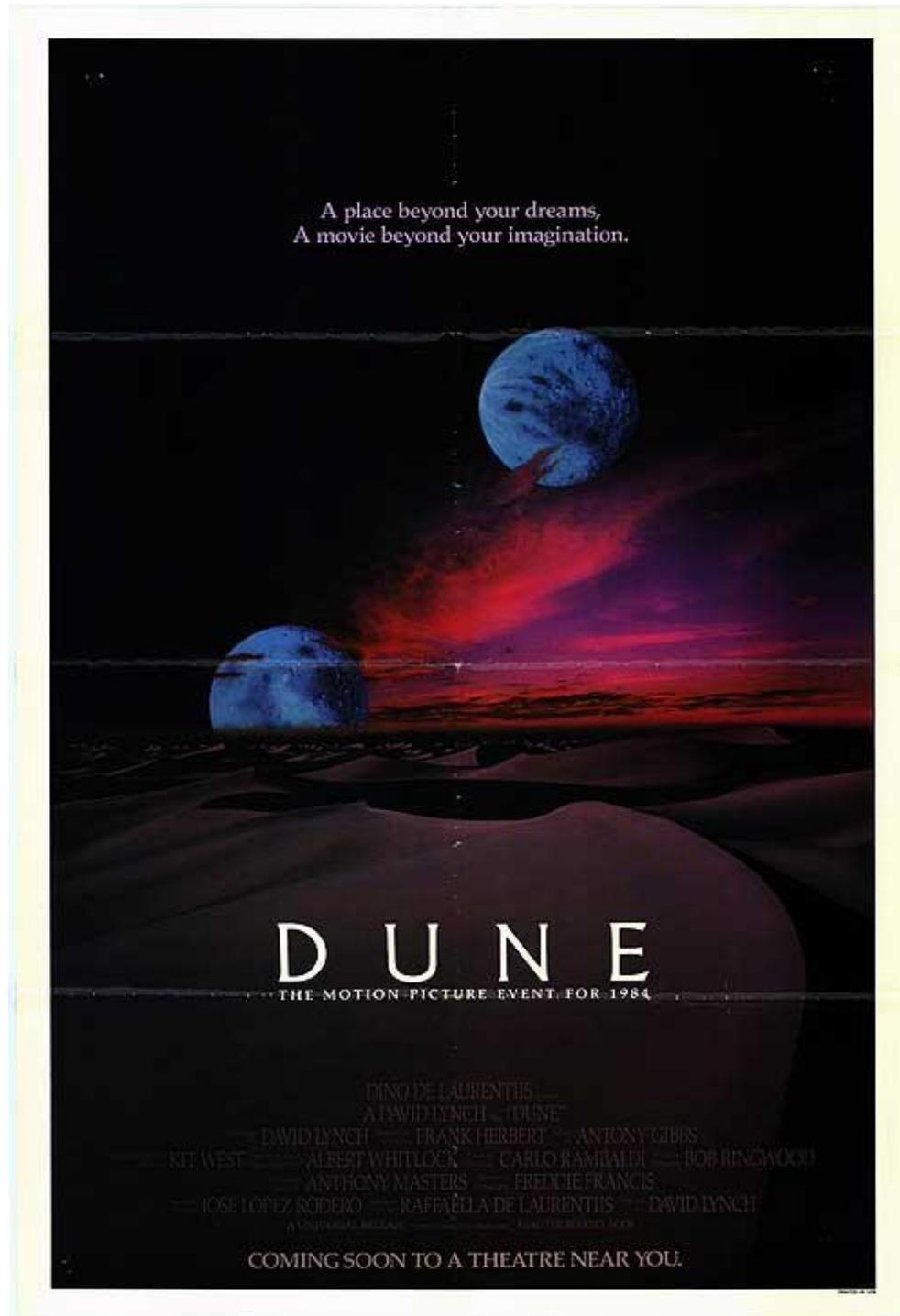


SCIENCE FICTION AND ITS CONNECTION TO PAST EMPIRES

The Shape of Things to Come

Homo futuris and the Imperial Project

Patricia Kerslake



Introduction

Thanks to Jack Kirby, we're all science fiction readers now.

Jack Kirby read the science fiction magazines of the 1950's and peppered his own work with those ideas. He and fellow comic-book artists like Steve Ditko generated *Captain America*, *the Fantastic Four*, *Thor*, *the Avengers*, *Spiderman*, *the X-Men* and pretty much the entire Marvel universe in the 1960's. Those characters and their science-fiction laden tales now dominate mainstream media. Science fiction, once a narrow genre of pulp fiction, can also today lay claim to global dominance. Through the entry point of comic books, the science-fiction content from the golden age work of editor John W. Campbell's *Astounding Science Fiction* magazine editor John W. Campbell and his authors (Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein and Arthur C. Clarke to name a few) has fueled today's landscape of superhero films and television shows. So we can look at science fiction today both as a vibrant, independent genre of concept-rich books and an ongoing wellspring of ideas and motifs which invigorate many of our mainstream narratives.

It benefits us now more than ever to understand the origins, conventions and messages of science fiction. We need to understand the nuts and bolts of this generation's narratives. What makes good science fiction? What is the state of science fiction today? It seems slightly stuck in Stage Four: Falling Empire (I wonder why), as evidenced in the surge of such dystopian scenarios as *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Hunger Games*, *Westworld*, on and on. What is with that? What is next? Where is science fiction going?

Fortunately, we have Patricia Kerslake to guide us.

A close reading of the interview below would be a semester in itself. I have no doubt that tracking down the references she scatters would be highly enriching. Just her response to my question #6 below alone deserves a day or two of sampling the recommended texts.



Still from the 1964 movie "The Fall of the Roman Empire," an epoch which science fiction writers love to replay

Review, “The Shape of Things to Come: Homo futuris and the Imperial Project”

Reviewed by Tom Durwood

Patricia Kerslake

A chapter from a longer work, “The Shapes of Things to Come” wonders if science fiction literature can move on from its present anchoring. Three moorings in particular worry Prof. Kerslake: Edward Gibbon, who wrote “The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire;” myths of the American Wild West; and the determinist philosophy of thinkers like Toynbee and Spengler. Will science fiction, she wonders, be able to shake it off and do what it is supposed to do: generate new models of science and social-justice concerns? The imperial model that has dominated science fiction, she argues, may have worn out its welcome.

Prof. Kerslake writes with confidence about and affection for her subject. Her writing is both rich with ideas and approachable. Here is a sample, where she describes Isaac Asimov’s model of empire, as seen in his *Foundation* trilogy:

The Asimovean model is comfortably conventional - an amalgam of nineteenth-century adventure novels and a twentieth-century confidence in science - and fits neatly within well-defined limits and parameters of a 'standard' empire. It is an empire of human proportions in a familiar galaxy.

Yow!! First of all, that’s actually true. Secondly, it is so effortlessly observed. Reading a passage like this is like talking in a college dorm, late at night. Here is another of her semi-mind-blowing concepts, delivered casually:

Is the fire burning low? Will the transmutation of cyclical history into fictional scenarios maintain its fascination, or is SF already becoming blasé and predictable?

I have never heard the idea expressed so succinctly that science fiction is a replay (in a changed state) of specific arcs in the cycle of history. Now that she mentions it, it seems like a fairly solid premise – I know Ursula LeGuin used to knock certain science fiction authors for generating Roman Empire retreads. Prof. Kerslake's added idea that science fiction might be getting blasé and predictable – now, that is a concept I need to think about. My first response is that it may well apply to a good deal (or even a majority) of science fiction, but there are new genres to which this does not apply.

Here she quotes fellow literary critic George Slusser in an effort to nail down what is what:

If SF lets us see the future, it is to enable us to experience dread, thus be warned away from an activity which, if pursued, leads us inexorably from bad to worse.

My point, of course, is that essays like Prof. Kerslake's make you think. This is the best kind of academic writing – smart, even-handed, provocative. She loves her topic and writes generously about sf practitioners.

Prof. Kerslake refers to the “insidious beckoning” of the empire model as a sort of addiction for our speculative writers. I can relate to the insidious beckoning of the empire model, having seen (unfortunately) the 1997 film “Starship Troopers.”

Prof. Kerslake considers Joe Haldeman's “The Forever War,” a military story in which World War II scenarios go interstellar. A basic question is this: what is

science fiction's purpose? Is it "a discovery machine" for futuristic phenomena? Is it a laboratory for cures to present-day social ills?

She devotes one-sixth of her essay to Walter Miller's cautionary 1959 tale of the power of imperialism and the cycles of history, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. Miller was an American combat pilot in World War II, and his epic story encompasses nuclear disaster and its awesome aftermath. Set in a Catholic monastery, the book spans thousands of years as civilization rebuilds itself. The monks preserve what is left of man's scientific knowledge until the world is again ready for it. In considering this work, Prof. Kerslake delivers one of her most impactful passages:

Whereas both Asimov and Heinlein see the future as a series of successful developments, each building on the previous one, Miller is suggesting that beyond each development lies an inevitable fall, and that humankind is unlikely to reach the stars except as a last act of desperation.

Other authors (besides Asimov and LeGuin) whom she touches for wisdom are Kim Stanley Robinson, Iain M. Banks, old-school E.E. "Doc" Smith and Neil Gaiman. For a non-scholar like me, this is like a treasure map.

Let me drill down into a single sentence, loading with meaning, and give a close reading as to how Prof. Kerslake thinks. Here is a typically idea-rich sentence of hers:

Will we discover other philosophers like Arnold Toynbee or Oswald Spengler whose thoughts of the deterministic nature of existence spark such great mid-twentieth-century sagas as Blish's *Cities in Flight* (1950-62) or Van Vogt's *The Voyage of the Space Beagle* (1950), or even Herbert's *Dune* series?

Prof. Kerslake tosses this reference off so easily!! After thirty minutes research, I begin to see what she means. Otto Spengler's online biography tells me that he is best known for his book *The Decline of the West* (1918), which covers all of world history. Spengler postulates that any culture is a superorganism with a limited and predictable lifespan. He rationalized Germany's downfall in World War I as part of a larger historical process. (Wikipedia)

What the heck!! This sounds grim. It also sounds time-bound, a philosophy that fits a certain time and place, but one that may not be very versatile. It turns out that I'm right – Spengler is way out of favor. But, as Prof. Kerslake promised, this fits the bill. The old-fashioned science fiction in my comfort zone is infused with this sensibility. The stoic fatalism of some of my favorite heroes exist in the shadow of a Spengler or Toynbee big-think framework. It is this element that gives us the compelling determinism we enjoy at end of *Blade Runner*, for instance. Toynbee is quite different. He was apparently far more prolific and widely read (and for a longer period) than Spengler. Any civilization grows, says Toynbee, when its leaders respond creatively to challenges and threats, and disintegrate when their leaders stop doing so. Civilizations finally sink due to nationalism, militarism, and 'tyranny of a despotic minority.'" Toynbee sees the rise and fall of civilization as a spiritual process.

Uh-oh. This is all too relevant to our current situation. I begin to see what Prof. Kerslake means by that one loaded sentence. "The Shape of Things to Come" is full of similarly robust and informative sentences, and I recommend it as a wonderful introduction to critical thinking about science fiction.



The “hidden empire” of Oz is more complex than the movie suggests.

Interview with Patricia Kerslake

October, 2018

1. For the general reader, can you identify or characterize several different portrayals of empire in science fiction? Are there different categories that a new reader might find useful? Here are six clumsy examples:

... Hidden empire (*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*)

... “Familiar’ or Old-World empires (Asimov)

... Clash of High Empires (Heinlein)

... Rebel Hero versus Dystopic or Falling Tyrannical Empire
(*Mockingjay*, *Maze Runner*)

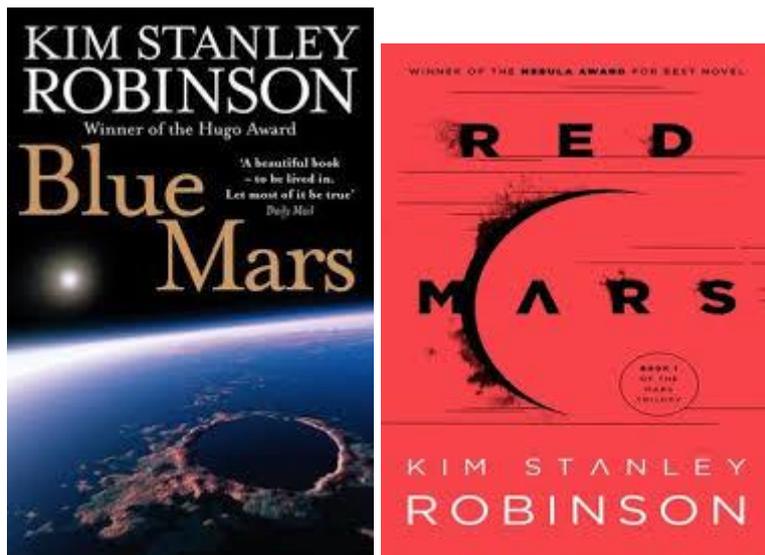
... Machine versus Man (*I Have No Mouth But I Must Scream*,
Terminator)

... Earth versus Alien Empire (*War of the Worlds*, *Day of the Triffyds*)

Fascinatingly, these variants are not different empires, but different *aspects* of empire. For example, L. Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz* (1900) emphasises the hidden controls of the imperial project – 'pay no attention to the man behind the curtain' – while both Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein wrote of big-picture, galactic empires, as did Frank Herbert in *Dune* (1965), where Paul (Kwisatz Haderach) Atreides, takes centre stage as one of the biggest rebels of them all. Since the rise of AI, there are more stories with robotic overlords and there's little I can add to those themes done to death such as the *Alien* series (1979-2017) and the *Predator* franchise (1987-2018), where the monstrous Other demands human fear and sacrifice. But you can find representations of most of these on a smaller scale in almost any story of imperialism. The combination of overweening power and the philosophy that 'might makes right' brings all these aspects to the fore, even today.

One of the 22 essential functions of science fiction, I think, is precisely this kind of question-asking: reversals of an habitual way of thinking...

If I were going to suggest different portrayals of empire to a new reader, I'd probably ask what *kind* of story they wanted to read. Something reassuring and positive? Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* trilogy (1992-1996). Something bizarre and savage? Iain M Banks *Use of Weapons* (1990). A story that examines political philosophies? Ken MacLeod's *The Stone Canal* (2001). Something that speaks of the power of the individual challenging the system? Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* (2005). An exploration of multiculturalism and xenophobia? Ann Leckie's *Provenance* (2017). SF is populated by endless thematic narratives within the imperial project. It would be a terrific idea for someone to catalogue imperial SF stories in a comprehensive, thematic database, as in an encyclopaedic format.



2. You use Walter M. Miller, author of “Canticle for Liebowitz,” as an example of real-life experience fueling a specific science-fiction set of narratives. Are there authors – Philip K. Dick, possibly -- whose work does not reveal the times in which they were written? Does it matter?

The SF genre is so broad and there are SF stories I’ll never have time to read, so I can only speak from experience. Most, if not all SF narratives of my acquaintance, look beyond the author’s current situation and write of something that is in some way different, that is alien and Other. However, no matter how outré or alienated the story might be, there is almost always *something* connecting the writer’s reality to it. This is entirely due to the implied reader.

In order to make the narrative understood by the reader (some SF stories are extraordinarily baffling and in need of a bit of help), there has to be *some* point of connection, some point of mutual reference, no matter how tenuous. It might be the fact that the protagonist is human, or that Earth is mentioned in some way, or there is some extrapolation of a contemporary science of which we might have heard (Ramscoop drives, for example). Even if the story itself is not of the writer’s own time, the narrative usually offers the reader a contextual bridge in order for them to make the necessary mental leap.

There is always another conjunction between the past and the future waiting just around the corner.

Haldeman’s *The Forever War* (1974) is an example of this, as are Miéville’s *Embassytown* (2011) and Carey’s *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2014). Is temporal or

cognitive estrangement essential in a good SF story? Not in the slightest, though there is an invisible elastic boundary between science fiction and pure fantasy and it helps to know on which side of the boundary you are reading, or you'll end up looking for authorial clues that are simply not there.

3. Is there a common element among your favorite science fiction books?

I think what drew me to SF in the first place was its lack of rules, or at least, the narrative's ability to transcend logical reality. The very first SF story I knowingly read was Edgar Rice-Burroughs' (he of *Tarzan* fame) *A Princess of Mars* (1914). It was a gift for my seventh birthday. I firmly believe my mother bought it as a hint because it had the word 'Princess' in it and, at the time, I was a horrible, precocious child.



The idea that John Carter could walk into a cave and wake up on Mars, enchanted me so much that I bought the rest of the *Barsoom* series (a further ten books) with my saved-up pocket money and devoured the lot inside a week. I've spent my life since then fascinated by stories of new worlds, of different lives and astounding possibilities. I am eternally excited by the extraordinary. I wish I could live another 500 years just to see what's coming next. Humans are phenomenally creative creatures.

4. In "The Shape of Things to Come: Homo futuris and the Imperial Project," you characterize cinematic science fiction as "a popularist parody of itself." In what ways have films watered-down the virtues of science fiction?

Part of SF's excitement is that it imagines the new and the (as yet) unthinkable. Iain M Banks writes about a sophisticated cocktail party where people are artistically mutilated for the evening (the mutilations are without pain, totally reversible and done by a surgical AI). Guests compete to see who can come up with the most violently gruesome disfigurements. New? Yes. Unthinkable? Also yes. In the space of a single paragraph, Banks challenges how we think of body

modification. Today's confronting versions of the Japanese *iruzumi* ('body suit' tattoos) are *nothing* compared to the possibilities of SF.

In the opposite direction, many of even the shortest of science fictions such as those by Philip K Dick (filmed stories include *Minority Report*; *Paycheck*; *The Adjustment Bureau*; *Total Recall*), or William Gibson (filmed stories include *Johnny Mnemonic*; *New Rose Hotel*) have been brutally 'hollywoodised'. The original short stories, some only a few thousand words long, were formidable because they contained so much conceptual material in a relatively tiny space. Dick's 'We can remember it for you wholesale' (1966, filmed as *Total Recall* 1990 and again in 2012), is 22 pages long. Gibson's short work *Johnny Mnemonic*, is only 6,505 words.

***Star Trek* was a cheerful kind of neo-colonialism, a non-imperialism which was inevitably contrasted against the Klingon Empire.**

In order to make a film for which patrons would be willing to pay at the cinema, all of these intense, dense little narratives have been stretched beyond recognition and padded with all sorts of drivel: tedious romantic scenes, lacklustre chases and pedestrian dialogue. This is one of the reasons you should probably not read any SF story before you see the film as you will doom yourself to endless disappointment.

5. Does it matter how much science content is in a science fiction narrative? The question of 'how much science' makes a 'science fiction' a perennial one. I love Arthur C Clarke's technological prescience and Ken MacLeod's avant scientific socialisation; though it's not necessarily the science that makes me read their stories, but rather the stories behind the science, which provide a showcase for the technology. It has to be a good story before it can be a good SF story. Having said that, most SF stories incorporate some scientific premise, even if it's only as an initial idea for the story itself. The number of SF narratives that have grown out of the single line 'A few years from now ...' are probably without count.

6. For readers who are new to the critical study of science fiction, what readings would you recommend?

Rather than go out to buy specific books, for anyone new to SF and interested in writing critically about the genre, the first places I'd suggest they go are all online. It's such a broad field that most printed texts are forced to specialise in only a very small area, whereas the really good SF websites are as broad as anyone might wish. For someone new to the genre, here's a few places I'd recommend they go to get warmed up:

- <https://www.syfy.com/> - all the latest info on new SF productions
- <https://sfrd.library.tamu.edu/site/> - the SF&F research database – fabulous place
- <http://guides.library.cornell.edu/c.php?g=31642&p=200579> – Cornell research guide
- <http://www.isfdb.org/> - the online speculative fiction database.
- <https://scifibrarian.com/2016/03/05/science-fiction-and-fantasy-databases/> - geekery
- And of course <https://www.depauw.edu/sfs/> - a fantastic journal

Once the individual has a clearer idea of what they want to research, they'll then have the names and terminology to help them do it. There are also several useful SF&F encyclopaedias, including:

- <http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/> - eds. Clute/Nicholls
- https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/209510.Science_Fiction - ed. Clute
- <https://www.abc-clio.com/ABC-CLIOCorporate/product.aspx?pc=B3976C> ed. Westfahl
- <https://www.sfgateway.com/> - online encyclopaedia

7. Whom do you feel is an under-rated science fiction author?

Argh. So many brilliant writers out there. Again, I can only offer the authors I adore and to whom I regularly return:

- John Brunner – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Brunner_\(novelist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Brunner_(novelist))
- Octavia Butler – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Octavia_E._Butler
- Poul Anderson – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poul_Anderson
- Emma Bull – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emma_Bull
- Ken MacLeod – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ken_MacLeod

8. What has changed the most about science fiction since Jules Verne and H. G. Wells?

The thing that seems to have changed the most since the end of the nineteenth century is our ability to imagine and visualise greater and more fantastic scenarios. Both Verne and Wells kept their SF close to their human audience and no further away than Mars (*War of the Worlds*, 1897; *From the Earth to the Moon*, 1865). Today, however, premises of alternate universes, of parallel dimensions and of technological dystopia are common. I think we've gradually learned how to disconnect our sense of disbelief from our reality, which would explain a number of things in our increasingly dystopic societies.

9. What are the most thoroughly realized fictional empires in science fiction? Would Frank Herbert's *Dune* be one? Which do you find to be the least-convincing? Where does *Star Wars* fall on your scale?

For the most thoroughly realist empire in SF, you really cannot go beyond Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* trilogy. Not only does he define all aspects of his neo-colonial empire from the basics of survival (the awkward realities of zero-gravity sex) to the finessing of terraforming the surface of Mars (deliberate environmental pollution), but he also considers the political, social, religious, philosophical and scientific developments of the New Martians.

In order to make a film for which patrons would be willing to pay at the cinema, all of these intense, dense little narratives have been stretched beyond recognition and padded with all sorts of drivel ...

Herbert's *Dune* empire, with its native Fremen and the great giant sandworms, the Bene Gesserit sisterhood and the overweening political power of the Landsraad, is more about the potential of humanity rather than the potential of empire. In the recreation of his own humanity, Paul Atreides also recreates imperialism. As with Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series in the nineteen-fifties, James Herbert tells us more of a fantasy story, whereas Robinson delivers neo-empire to us, warts and all.

I have always loved *Star Trek*, not because of the hammy acting or the dreadful monster-costumes, but because it offered a tremendous hope for where humans might go in search of themselves as well as any strange planets. *Trek* was a cheerful kind of neo-colonialism, a non-imperialism which was inevitably contrasted against the Klingon Empire. *Star Wars*, however, is more of a fantasy

quest, describing the eternal battle between the principles of love and hate and where the baddies still wear black hats.

I'd like to bring in Iain M Banks' *Culture* here, though while the Culture is not really an empire, there is certainly a clear aspect of imperialism running through his stories.



Is machinery crucial to good science fiction? Art by the great John Berkey

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