

WHAT IS SCIENCE FICTION?

Perhaps because I work with science fiction as well as read it for pleasure, I have become more aware of — and more open to — people who expect me to justify my interest in it in a way that I can't imagine readers of westerns or thrillers being asked to do. Science fiction is widely seen as being separate from general fiction and therefore, if not wildly eccentric, has to be something different, even special. 'What is science fiction all about?' I am asked, as if in a few simple words I could provide a philosopher's stone. But whilst I can quickly tell them what sf isn't all about — it's not about nuclear explosion-enlarged hamsters terrorising New York, UFOs, mad scientists, Martian invasions, bug-eyed monsters, etc, etc. — I can never think of a concise explanation of what it is all about. It therefore seemed a good idea to ask some noted sf authors to explain why they like science fiction and what they think it's all about — and that is the subject of this occasional series.

Our first contributor is Edmund Cooper (who also writes as Richard Avery), who has been in the front rank of British sf writers for many years with novels like *All Fools' Day*, *The Cloud Walker* and *The Overman Culture*.



My View by Edmund Cooper

This is a purely personal statement about science fiction, for which I make no apology. I realize that many science fiction addicts will disagree vehemently with my views. The genre is peculiar and wide in its concern with technological possibilities and future scenarios. People like Asimov, Clarke, Bob Shaw and others have given us technological innovations that are stimulating and interesting. Unfortunately, few such writers have been able to develop real character in their work. Asimov's robots have

more character than his people and Clarke only uses people to express his ideas. I am much more concerned with the interaction between my characters than with scientific or technological innovation. I am not interested in galactic empires or interplanetary wars. My main concern is with possible futures for the people on Planet Earth.

I know of only one science fiction writer who was executed for writing science fiction. He added a new word to the language and, of course, his name was Sir Thomas More. He attacked the divine right of Kings, conventional systems of government, conventional systems of education and conventional morality. In short, he was using science fiction as a form of social criticism. His novel had a profound effect through western Europe. It was written in the lingua franca that was in 1516 Latin. After the publication of *Utopia* things were never quite the same again. He was living in retirement in London and therefore had no need to take the Oath of Supremacy which Henry VIII required his Ministers to take. So Henry had him topped because his notions had exploded like a bomb.

The point I am trying to make is that, for me, science fiction — if it has any relevance at all — is a form of social criticism or satire.

Samuel Butler used it as such in *Erewhon*; Aldous Huxley used it with devastating effect in *Brave New World*; George Orwell in 1984 gave us a nightmarish vision which may not be far from the truth. Kurt Vonnegut has used science fiction to criticise the increasing decadence of American society. H G Wells, of course, was one of the giants who used sf as social criticism. It would be presumptuous of me to claim to be on a level with writers such as these. But I may modestly claim to belong to their company. Readers of my work will discover that much of it is concerned with what I suspect to be relatively immediate and alarming trends in society.

I do not assert that my ideas are necessarily right. I have attacked Women's Lib. and the tremendously growing industrial and political power of the Trade Unions. I have attacked corrupt government and the cynical aspect of international relations. All I wish to do is to entertain my readers while causing them to consider whether Edmund Cooper is as nutty as a fruit cake or whether some of his ideas may be valid.

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NEWS BULLETIN

● **SF IN THE CINEMA AND ON TV:** In the last few months I have heard and read so many opinions about science fiction films and TV programmes that I am beginning to doubt my own critical faculties. I've been told why *Star Wars*, which I liked, was so bad, and subjected to wildly enthusiastic praise for *Blake's 7*, which I think is ghastly and has the dubious honour of making *Space 1999* almost but not quite watchable. In general, however, I am inclined to agree that sf on the screen is way behind the real thing — written sf. *Star Wars*, accepted as fantasy or space opera, was great fun; *CEIII* was visually stunning, but the story was rubbish; *Superman* was a super movie, both visually effective and great fun, but not strictly science fiction. And these are the big sf movies! The rest mainly consist of actors in weird costumes trying not to look embarrassed as they plough through an unbelievable, cliché ridden script.

Looking ahead at sf films either in production or lined-up for release we have the multi-million *Battlestar Galactica*, panned as a *Star Wars* rip-off. *Starship Invasions* with ex-Uncle Robert Vaughan (other ex-Uncle David McCallum is making a TV series *Sapphire and Steel* with Avenger Joanna Lumley) and Christopher Lee as the alien commander of a fleet of UFOs bent on creating havoc. *The Humanoid*, about a man made indestructible by an atomic bomb (dear, oh dear). *Humanoid*, not to be mistaken with *The Humanoid*, about a bunch of UFO contactees whose blood turns blue after their experience (I suppose *Blake's 7* isn't that bad). *The Terrible Jaw Man* about a scientist who turns into a shark-man — and no doubt terrorises a well-known beach. And a host of re-makes: *The Time Machine* (to be called *Return of the Time Machine*), *Things to Come*, *War of the Worlds*, *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers*, *When Worlds Collide*, and the third remake of Mark Twain's classic satire, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, brought right up to date and re-titled *The Spaceman and King Arthur*.

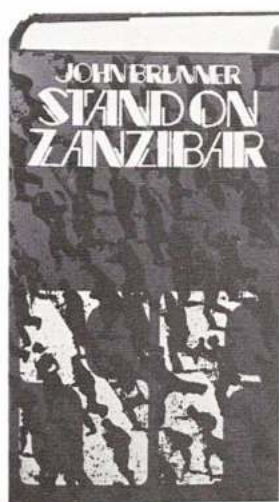
With the exception of some of the re-makes, the future of sf film doesn't sound like coming near to sf books. One hope on the horizon lies with Lester Goldsmith and the London-based Lime-light Films who plan to adapt noted sf stories and are arranging for the authors to write the scripts. Among the writers are Isaac Asimov, Arthur C Clarke, Robert Heinlein, Harry Harrison, A E van Vogt, Larry Niven and Joe Haldeman.

● CONVENTION UPDATES

SEACON '79. The 37th World SF Convention. GOH Fritz Leiber, Brian Aldiss, Harry Bell. Toastmaster Bob Shaw. Metropole Hotel, Brighton, Aug 23-27. Write: Seacon, 14 Henrietta Street, London WC2E 8QJ

If you have any comments to make about science fiction or the Science Fiction Book Club please write to Paul G Begg, Science Fiction Book Club, Brunel House, Forde Road, Newton Abbot, Devon

Science Fiction Classic



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