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Review of Darko Suvin's *Defined by a Hollow: Essays on Utopia, Science Fiction and Political Epistemology*

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*Defined by a Hollow: Essays on Utopia,
Science Fiction and Political Epistemology,*
Darko Suvin, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010

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Abstract

This review considers Darko Suvin's recent career anthology *Defined by a Hollow* with respect to debates about the relevance of Marxism and utopian critique in the context of a global neoliberal hegemony that (twenty years after Fukuyama) still imagines itself as the 'end of history'. Suvin's work suggests that the relationship between Marxism and aesthetics in such times is not simply a quirk of the academy, but is in fact a politically necessary conjoining of materialist praxis and quasi-religious inspiration.

Keywords:

Darko Suvin; Fredric Jameson; neoliberalism; end of history; utopia; Marxism; science fiction

Volume 6 of the Ralahine Utopian Studies series is a career-spanning anthology of the work of Darko Suvin, whose paradigm-shifting criticism in the early 1970s almost single-handedly established the theoretical contours of the still-vibrant field of science-fiction studies and whose contributions remain 40 years later at the core of debates about the relationship between science fiction, utopian thought, and leftist politics. Retrospective but not backward-looking – and usefully focusing on Suvin’s important post-1989 work, which may be less familiar to the critics of science fiction who know his work best – *Defined by a Hollow* nicely encapsulates decades of criticism and theory from one of our most prolific and influential citizens (and partisans) of utopia.

A brief look at the dedication page for *Defined by a Hollow* makes clear the theoretical lineage of Western Marxism in which Suvin seeks to situate his work. Although the book, he writes, is to bear ‘no private dedicatees’, ‘it should recall the great ancestors and masters of thinking whose shadows hover over it, giving inspiration, provoking doubt, testing it and being tested’ (p. ix). The first name listed is Karl Marx; next follow Lenin, Raymond Williams and Bertolt Brecht, and then Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, and Fredric Jameson – a veritable gathering of the utopian caucus of the Western Marxist tradition. At the same time, the dedication ultimately suggests that the book’s grounding is not only in theory but also in down-to-earth resistive praxis: it concludes with a remembrance of the anti-fascist partisans of Suvin’s native Yugoslavia, a country whose post-1989 dissolution into chaos and civil war casts a long, dark shadow over the second half of the anthology.

By now it is nothing new to note that ‘utopia’ may be the most famous pun in literature, with critical analyses of utopia, utopianism, and utopian form(s) still inevitably beginning with Sir Thomas More’s coining of the word to famously suggest both *eu-topos* [the good place] and *ou-topos* [the non-place]. Science fiction has always contained within itself a similar paradox, suggesting on the one hand a verisimilitudinous narrative plausibility grounded in genuine scientific knowledge – science fiction as an extrapolative or even predictive genre, ‘tomorrow’s headlines today’ – and at the same time designating unrestrained flights of fantasy and *irreality*, as in the ubiquitous headlines in science journalism that proclaim the latest finding or gadget as ‘*not* science fiction, but science *fact*’. The uneasy, oxymoronic status of the ‘science’ in ‘science fiction’ – a genre that despite pretensions and protestations to the contrary remains dominated by such manifestly unscientific absurdities as warp drives, force fields, time machines, and super powers – is sufficiently troubling that for decades authors and critics of the genre have generally agreed to just ignore it altogether, preferring alternative categories such as ‘speculative fiction’ and (even more commonly) the referent-less abbreviation ‘SF’ in an effort to sidestep this inescapable foundational contradiction as best as can be managed.

The innovation of Darko Suvin in his 1972 essay ‘On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre’ – which became the seed for his most famous and best-read work, 1979’s *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, as well as subsequent works that helped inaugurate the field of science-fiction studies – was a judo-like embrace of this opposition that reoriented SF around this very paradox and in the process transformed both horns of the dilemma. Transmuting an apparently hopeless contradiction into constitutive antimony, Suvin housed SF’s foundational dialectic between facticity and confabulation in a dialectic he called *cognitive estrangement*, which, he argued, is the characteristic aesthetic of the genre and the true engine of its appeal. Unpacking the two terms, we have *cognition* – loosely defined as *Wissenschaft* and including ‘not only natural but also all the cultural or historical sciences and even scholarship’, not insignificantly the Marxist tradition among them¹ – and *estrangement*, explicitly derived from the Russian formalists and Brecht’s famous *V-Effekt* to denote the opening of the mind to previously

unimagined alternatives that, in turn, cast new and unexpected light on the empirical and the everyday.² SF, then, makes use of the modes of cognition native to science and scholarship, but not at all to predict the future or to research and develop new technologies for technoscience; rather, it does so to defamiliarise our empirical reality and actually-existing history to give us access to alternative possibilities and ways of being.

A restatement of this proposition found in a later chapter of *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* makes the interactivity between cognition and estrangement clear: Suvin writes that 'SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance of hegemony of a fictional "novum" (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive logic' (p. 69).³ Students of Bloch will recognise Suvin's borrowing of Bloch's notion of the *novum*, which here becomes science-fictionalised precisely insofar as its *newness* is driven by and tethered to cognition, not only empirical physical science but also (and most essentially) the social sciences, politics, and history. Nor is the word 'validate' chosen lightly – cognition functions as a check upon the imagination, the only thing keeping it honest. Suvin's position is that without a relationship to a cognitive interpretive horizon, SF degrades into mere fantasy, its 'narrative logic' no more than 'overt ideology plus Freudian erotic patterns' – and therefore useless for the cause of conceiving and building a better world than this one. (A line can be drawn from this critique back to Marx's famous denunciation of the wishful thinking of the 'utopian socialists'.) If SF is a 'hidden parable' (p. 170) – if the pleasure of SF comes in judging the reality it depicts against our own physical and social reality – then (so Suvin's argument goes) some sort of cognitive reality-principle will always be necessary to structure this interpretative decoding.

In the chapters from *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* that open *Defined by a Hollow*, we find that the interplay of cognition and estrangement results in the generation of an 'imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment' that is always in essence about sketching the contours of utopia (p. 8). The two genres merge inextricably together, becoming intertwined: pre-nineteenth-century utopian fiction is reinscribed as 'an early and primitive branch of SF' (p. 39), while SF becomes 'if not a daughter, yet a niece' of utopia (p. 43) and contemporary utopian narrative likewise becomes 'both an independent aunt and dependent daughter of SF' (p. 383). For Suvin and the thinkers who would follow his approach, SF is at once the 'privileged locus' (ibid.) for utopian speculation in our moment but also always firmly situated within utopia's boundaries. Thus the preoccupation with futurism and prediction that often characterises approaches to SF becomes completely beside the point, as does the inevitable scientific nitpicking of fans and non-fans alike. SF instead emerges out of the dialectic between the real and the imagined to gesture not towards predicted futures but towards *desired* ones.

Consequently the 'science' of science fiction is for Suvin less about physics than it is about historical materialism. 'A novum is fake', Suvin writes, 'unless it in some way participates in and partakes of what Bloch called the "front-line of historical process" – which for him (and for me) as a Marxist means a process intimately concerned with strivings for a disalienation of people and their social life' (p. 87).⁴ Utopia is consequently always from below: 'All utopias involve people who radically suffer of the existing system and radically desire to change it' (p. 30, n. 11).

Elsewhere the point is made even more directly. '*We need radically liberating novum only*', Suvin writes in 1997: 'By "radically liberating" I mean, as Marx did, a quality opposed to simply marking difference: a novelty that is in critical opposition to degrading relationships between people – and, I strongly suspect,

in fertile relation to memories of a humanized past.’ (pp. 206–7.) SF’s narrative and thematic focus on the *novum* is always ultimately about its impact on the lived lives of *people*, and the ways in which it makes those lives better or worse – and SF is consequently always in essence about big-‘h’ History, estranging the reader from the naturalised social relations and class struggles of capitalism so that she might recognise them, see and feel the urgent need for their reshaping (p. 89).

Naturally Suvin’s definitions of SF have not been accepted without argument in the field, particularly with respect to his general dismissal of what we might call ‘non-cognitive estrangement’: folklore, fantasy, and myth. In addition to scholars such as John Rieder and Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. who think SF’s fantasies of empire mark it out as a genre of the political *Right*, not the Left, there are those who think Suvin’s instrumentalist, exclusionary reliance on cognition simply cannot be sustained. A special issue of *Historical Materialism* in 2002, edited by Mark Bould and China Miéville, was devoted to the critique of Suvin’s dismissal of fantasy, with multiple contributors including Fredric Jameson and Carl Freedman seeking out the possibility of a ‘Marxist fantasy’ that is radical without being ‘cognitive’ in the Suvinian sense. Such an alternative tradition might turn (as many of the *Historical Materialism* contributors do) to the radical fantasy of an author such as Samuel Delany – or they might instead turn as Jack Zipes does to fairy tales, which, Zipes argues, ‘celebrate humankind’s capacity to transform the mundane into the utopian as part of a communal project’.⁵ (For the record, Suvin happens to think that the vast majority of what is published as SF is essentially non-cognitive as well, and, indeed, in recent years has loosened the once-sacrosanct boundary between SF and fantasy by conceding that some fantasies may indeed have radical potential after all.)⁶

In the recent anthology *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction*, also edited by Bould and Miéville, considerations and reconsiderations of Suvin’s emphasis on cognition are likewise the starting point for nearly every essay in that collection, with many worrying that the very idea of cognition as such might be suspect. Perhaps the most notable of these is Miéville’s own contribution, which provocatively argues that Suvin’s cognition may be too bound up with the ideology of capitalist realism to be trusted. ‘To the extent that SF claims to be based on “science,” and indeed on what is deemed “rationality”’, Miéville writes, ‘it is based on capitalist modernity’s ideologically projected self-justification: not some abstract/ideal “science,” but capitalist science’s bullshit about itself’.⁷ Carl Freedman’s contribution to the book, however, makes the case that Suvinian ‘cognitive estrangement’ not only remains vital in SF but that it is in fact the buried logic of Marxism more generally. In his chapter, Freedman identifies a dialectical disjuncture between what he calls the *inflationary* and the *deflationary* modes of Marxist critique. Deflation is ‘the attempt to destroy all illusions necessary or useful to the preservation of class society in general and of capitalism in particular’⁸ – demystification, necessarily grounded in the knowledge practices Suvin calls cognition. This is Marxism as we typically understand it, as critique. But Freedman argues that Marxism also requires inflation, which is to say it requires utopia: ‘Marxism ultimately aims at the positive project of human liberation and self-realisation, rather than only at the negative task of destroying capitalism and other forms of class (and other) oppression. . . . For Marxism, visionary transcendence is the necessary completion of astringent demystification.’⁹ This ‘visionary transcendence’ is, as Freedman notes, as old as the *Manifesto*, which famously promised the overthrow of history itself. Crucially, Freedman’s two modes of critique require each other to function. Without cognition, we lack the map of the system required to fight capitalism; without estrangement, we would have no roadmap of where we are headed, and nothing to fight for. In this way the dialectic structuring

science fiction turns out, somewhat unexpectedly, to be precisely the same as the one that structures Marxism itself.¹⁰

That Marxism should begin to resemble science fiction is somehow fitting for the era of neoliberal ascendancy in which we find ourselves, a time in which the very capacity to imagine alterity at all seems under dire threat. Both Suvin and Phillip Wegner note in their separate excellent Introductions to *Defined by a Hollow* a growing disjuncture in Suvin's work between *recognising* capitalism and *reshaping* it in parallel with the emergence of post-Fordist global capitalist hegemony. While (as Wegner takes pains to make clear) Suvin is not nostalgic for Soviet or Titoist state communism, the 1989 breakup of the Soviet Union and the subsequent disintegration of Yugoslavia nonetheless stands for Suvin as proof of 'the final collapse of the modernist utopian promise of the Bolshevik revolution and the apparent evaporation of any organised leftwing challenge to the predatory violence of global capitalism' (p. xxiv). The essays in the second half of the anthology consequently express an increasingly dire pessimism about the project of civilisation, as is evident from only a listing of their titles: 'The Doldrums: Eight Nasty Poems of 1989–1999'; 'Where Are We? How Did We Get Here? Is There Any Way Out?'; 'Utopia from Orientation to Agency: What Are We Intellectuals under Post-Fordism to Do?'; 'Inside the Whale, or *etsi communismus non daretur*: Reflections on How to Live when Communism Is a Necessity but Nowhere on the Horizon'. The twentieth century becomes refashioned by the later Suvin as the 'century of betrayals', in which 'the best people, the greatest achievements lead to the worst horrors' – a historical wager on hope that did not pay off because 'the enemies outside and inside ourselves were too many, too tough' (p. 362). Capitalism, post-1973 and especially post-1989, is both dystopia triumphant and a chilling anti-utopia, an evil twin that has stolen all it can from utopia only to promote its own nightmare of exploitation, oppression, violence, and surveillance in its place (p. 381) – an infantilising necrosis of history and human agency Suvin frequently shorthands as 'Disneylandification' (p. 389 and *passim*).

At times the precariousness of our situation seems to shift from the register of dystopia – an enemy which might at least still be resisted – over into out-and-out apocalypse, as when Suvin notes in a 1997 address to the Society for Utopian Studies that the 'most daring utopia' we might still hope for today is no longer 'Earthly Paradise' but only 'the prevention of Hell on Earth': 'May the Earth remain our habitable mother, rather than being pushed by greedy classes and imbecilitated masses (as today) the way of ecological catastrophe, and the ensuing great Migration of Peoples, the bitter State and corporation wars, the civil wars of constructed racism and ethnicity!' (p. 259.) The only viable alternative to the current catastrophe remains socialism, which in this essay and others shifts the stakes of resisting capitalism from ending the immiseration of the exploited classes into an existential struggle, a battle for life itself – in the process solidifying the replacement of the 'socialism or barbarism' of the early Marxist period with its twentieth-century equivalent, Buckminster Fuller's 'utopia or oblivion' (*ibid.*). Cleverly twisting Thatcher's famous proclamation, we find that in an age of disasters there is indeed 'no alternative' – no alternative to utopia (p. 11). In the face of catastrophe and apocalypse, rather than nihilistically proclaiming the end of time Suvin declares instead the necessity of beginning to build our arks (p. 207).

In this line of argument Suvin is happy to admit his debt to the well-known work of Fredric Jameson, who has similarly made his reputation discovering the dreams of utopia still lurking behind even the worst horrors. In 'Utopia as Replication' – a follow-up and partial reconsideration of his 2005 *Archaeologies of the Future* that was reprinted as a chapter in 2010's *Valences of the Dialectic* –

Jameson too notes the parade of disasters that threaten not only the ability to live a non-alienated life but also the very possibility of life *as such* (ecological catastrophe, global poverty, widespread structural unemployment, endlessly proliferating wars, to only begin to name them) before pessimistically admitting 'that in each of these areas no serious counterforce exists anywhere in the world, and certainly not in the United States, which is itself the cause of most of them'.¹¹ For Jameson, as for Suvin, the extreme hopelessness of the situation is only further proof of postmodernity's fundamental incapacity to imagine utopia. (This is the peculiar sense in which utopia is 'defined by a hollow', that is, defined by its very absence.) This incapacity in turn directs Jameson to privilege problems of utopian form over utopian content, focusing on the way utopia structures our most cherished imaginings and undergirds all political praxis, even and perhaps especially when we are not consciously aware of it.¹²

Valences ends with a similar call to imagine utopia not as something cognisable or realisable in our actual lives but as the 'absolute negation' of our actual history, even as a kind of parallel world, of which we can obtain only the most furtive (if most necessary) glimpses.¹³ Utopia is able to survive, this is all to say, even its apparent disproof. It is in this sense that Jameson can make the seemingly counterintuitive declaration that 'the worldwide triumph of capitalism . . . secures the priority of Marxism as the ultimate horizon of thought in our time'.¹⁴ The stronger capitalism becomes, the stronger Marxism remains as its necessary other, its inevitable critique. Marxism remains the truth of capitalism's basic insufficiency, the ghost of its supersession that it can never hope to extirpate.

Jamesonian Marxism has sometimes been derided – unfairly – as a 'Marxism of failure', in which our failures to achieve or even imagine a better world are somehow made to count as much or more than our successes. But the point has never been to build a beautiful monument to failure; it is to mobilise those failures into a new resolve and start again. Utopia is not some static achievable end-state, not a sweet reward for the virtuous; it is, as SF author Kim Stanley Robinson (a former student of Jameson, and a favourite of both Jameson and Suvin) memorably put it in his 1995 utopian novel *Pacific Edge*, a 'dynamic, tumultuous, agonizing process, with no end. Struggle forever'.¹⁵ No-one said it would be easy.

The second half of *Defined by a Hollow* follows this basically Jamesonian trajectory but at the same time makes clear just how diminished this on-going utopian struggle has become in times as dark as ours. Reading Suvin one cannot escape the sense that we will all go to our graves still fearing that utopia has only ever been a lie. In one essay – 'Utopianism from Orientation to Agency' – the promised moment of agency never actually arrives; Suvin instead admits that 'having arrived within hailing distance of the end of our species and perhaps of vertebrate life on Earth, the wonderful but possibly somewhat elite form of the scholarly essay begins at the end to fail me' (p. 260). Desperate to be told some secret plan, or at least to be pointed to the exit before the rest of the theatre burns down, Suvin's readers instead receive five short maxims about utopia that, horrifyingly, place the burden of utopia's rebirth on us ourselves. Having established the ever-accelerating speed with which humanity is barrelling towards its own destruction, having named the problem so convincingly that no solution seems adequate or even possible, the essay's final epigram, 'Do not expect from utopia more than from yourselves', takes on a disturbing double valence, especially when paired with the quote from Kierkegaard that begins the piece: 'We literally do not want to be what we are' (p. 218).

If we can expect no more from utopia than what we are, and we do not want to be what we are, then somehow we must find some way to change. And much more than Jameson, Suvin is a believer in the power of utopia to mould us and change us – and (again in distinction from Jameson) locates this power

not only in the furtive glimpses of utopian *form* but also in the explicit plan-making and solidarity-crafting of utopian *content*. Utopia is, after all, a 'verbal *construction*', an estrangement '*created by* discontented social classes interested in otherness and change' (p. 30; including 2008 revision in n. 11, emphasis mine). That is, utopia *is* itself a kind of political praxis – it is a built thing, shaped and crafted, a story we tell ourselves to keep going and to remind ourselves of *where* it is that we are supposed to be going in the first place. In this light, poetry and art emerge as competitors to the sorts of thinking we call theory, or even as secret species of theory in their own right: 'Poetry (artistic production) is thus potentially a privileged form for conveying and constituting cognition, for humanizing it by means of figures and events recalling but also modifying the life-world, and for understanding what cognition is and may be. . . . Thus, following Benjamin, worlds of art may (in the best cases) present us with radically different and/or radically better *experiences*, whose shapings are then guides to salvation.' (p. 298.) In *Defined by a Hollow* this valorisation of poetry is fully realised; Suvin's poetry is granted several chapters alongside his prose.

Of course, if telling a pretty story about utopia were sufficient to create utopia the struggle could end here; justice would have already rained down from the heavens with the publication of the first modernist classics, socialism established forever on the strength of the first science-fictional utopias. Art, poetry, utopia – all are of course useless without action, without organisation, without collectivity and political struggle. Suvin is as aware as anyone of the risk that the dream of utopia might be mistaken for a real one – he has not forgotten Disneylandification, nor the way that free-market neoliberalism presents itself as a utopia already realised – but he nonetheless reminds us that the dream of another, better world remains the first and necessary step towards achieving it.

If this all begins to sound a bit like religion, it should; one of the final essays in *Defined by a Hollow* is an explicit call for a 'a new value system, centred in liberation of labour and creativity', that will function as a materialist replacement for religion (in an evolutionary sense, standing in relation to religion 'as lungs are to gills') focusing on salvation in what Suvin frequently calls the 'this-worldly', the here and now (p. 481). Following Gramsci, and echoing Freedman, Suvin repeatedly insists that an orientation towards utopia – 'an optimism of the will' – remains the necessary companion of 'pessimism of the intellect' (pp. 396, 485). We must, indeed, have both. Facts, figures, and a cool appraisal of the machines and mechanisms of repression are not by themselves sufficient to craft a politics – as much as these we need a 'salvational doctrine for one and all' that kicks in *before* we die, not after. 'Without it', Suvin writes – without utopia – 'any liberatory movement shall fail: no revolution without revelation' (p. 499).

The historical relationship between Marxism and literary theory in this light turns out to be not some contingent quirk of the academy, but necessary and vital – and the presence of utopian cognition in arts and literature an essential part of the Marxist project as a whole. Suvin's is a Marxism that requires beauty, a Marxism that *is itself* beautiful. 'We need to realize', Suvin writes, 'that there is no poetry without communism, and no communism without poetry. All poets know this, often in fantastic metamorphoses; few communists have allowed their suspicions to flower' (p. 377). Such a proclamation unexpectedly promotes Emma Goldman's famous (if misattributed) exclamation to the level of a fundamental axiom. Not only 'if I can't dance, I don't want your revolution'; if I can't dance – and paint, and film, and write, and dream of better times than these – there can be no revolution in the first place.

Notes

1. Suvin 1979, p. 13.
2. Suvin 1979, p. 6.
3. Also in Suvin 1979, p. 63.
4. Also in Suvin 1979, pp. 81–2.
5. Zipes 2002, p. xiii.
- 6 . ‘Let me therefore revoke, probably to general regret, my blanket rejection of fantastic fiction. The divide between cognitive (pleasantly useful) and noncognitive (useless) does not run between SF and fantastic fiction but inside each – though in rather different ways and in different proportions, for there are more obstacles to liberating cognition in the latter.’ (Suvin 2000, p. 211.)
- 7 . Miéville 2009, p. 240.
8. Freedman 2009, p. 72.
9. Freedman 2009, pp. 72–3.
10. For more on this subject and on the relationship between science fiction and Marxism, see my review of *Red Planets*, ‘Marxism as Science Fiction’ (Canavan 2010).
11. Jameson 2010, p. 412.
12. ‘This kind of prospective hermeneutic is a political act only in one specific sense: as a contribution to the reawakening of the imagination of possible and alternate futures, a reawakening of that historicity which our system – offering itself as the very end of history – necessarily represses and paralyzes. This is the sense in which utopology revives long-dormant parts of the mind, organs of political and historical and social imagination which have virtually atrophied for lack of use, muscles of praxis we have long since ceased exercising, revolutionary gestures we have lost the habit of performing, even subliminally. Such a revival of futurity and of the positing of alternate futures is not itself a political program nor even a political practice: but it is hard to see how any durable or effective political action could come into being without it.’ (Jameson 2010, p. 434.)
13. Jameson 2010, p. 612.
14. Jameson 2010, p. 605.
15. Robinson 1995, p. 95.

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