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SCIENCE FICTION VS REALITY

Address By

HUGO GERNSBACK

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AS ONE WHO has been continuously immersed in science fiction, for almost 50 years, I believe it would be apropos to look at a number of facets of the art of science fiction and explain a few points which have puzzled many of its followers.

First and foremost, just what is science fiction? Second, what is it trying to accomplish? Third, why is it of such vital importance today? Fourth, what is its future? I hope to throw some light on these questions in my talk today.

There is a vast amount of confusion nowadays regarding the interpreta-

tion of science fiction as a vehicle of communication of ideas.

The average man unfortunately does not differentiate between science fiction on one hand and fantasy, fairy tales or adventure on the other. Indeed many authors believe that they are writing science fiction, when actually they are fabricating Alice In Wonderland tales. There is nothing wrong with fantasy or adventure literature -- indeed there have been countless excellent stories in this field, but they can never be science fiction. Thus if you take an otherwise excellent Western and transfer its locale to an imaginary planet that or-

20th YEAR OF PUBLICATION

bits Alpha Centauri, that does not necessarily make it a science fiction story.

When I brought out the pioneer science fiction magazine AMAZING STORIES in April 1926, I said editorially:

"At first thought it does seem impossible that there could be room for another fiction magazine in this country. The reader may well wonder, 'aren't there enough already, with the several hunfreds now being published?' True. But this is not 'another fiction magazine.' AMAZING STORIES is a new kind of fiction magazine! It is entirely new -- entirely different -- something that has never been done before in this country..

"There is the usual fiction magazine, the love story and the sex-appeal type of magazine, the adventure type, and so on, but a magazine of 'Scientifiction' is a pioneer in its field in America.

"By 'scientifiction' I mean the Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and Edgar Allan Poe type of story -- a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision....

"And not only that! Poe, Verne, Wells, Bellamy, and many others have proved themselves real prophets. Prophecies made in many of their most amazing stories are being realized -- and have been realized. Take the fantastic submarine of Jules Verne's most famous story, 'Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea', for instance. He predicted the present-day submarine almost down to the last bolt! New inventions pictured for us in the scientifiction of today are not at all impossible of realization tomorrow. Many great science stories destined to be of an historical interest are still to be written.... Posterity will point to them as having blazed a new trail, not only in literature and fiction, but in progress as well."

I made these remarks 34 years ago. It will be noted that I used the word "Scientifiction" then -- I did not originate the term "Science Fiction" till 1929 in my magazine SCIENCE WONDER STORIES, when I observed on page 3 of the June 1929 issue:

"I started the movement of science fiction in 1908 through my first magazine MODERN ELECTRICS. At that time it was an experiment. Science fiction-au-

thors were scarce. There were not a dozen worth mentioning in the entire world!"

What I said in 1929 is just as true today in respect to true science fiction authors. Note that I emphasize the word science. There are still not more than a dozen real science fiction authors in the world even today.

Classic science fiction writers of the calibre of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells will always be exceedingly scarce. Who are the outstanding authors who really write the best imaginary science stories today? The following is perhaps as good a list as any, keeping in mind the accent on science:

Dr. Arthur C. Clarke
Dr. Isaac Azimov
Robert A. Heinlein
A. E. van Vogt
Clifford D. Simak
Theodore Sturgeon
Hal Clement

The work of these highly imaginative authors certainly will exemplify the early slogans which I used to adorn the mastheads of AMAZING STORIES in 1926 and SCIENCE WONDER STORIES in 1929: Extravagant Fiction Today -- Cold Fact Tomorrow, also Prophetic Fiction is the Mother of Scientific Fact. Through the years, in my preoccupation with popularizing science fiction, I added other slogans in variation of the theme: Science Fiction Today -- Fact Tomorrow; Science Fiction is the Blueprint of the Future.

You will observe that the invariable leitmotif of my interpretation of science fiction has remained the same to this day: It must mirror the present or the future in acceptable and plausible scientific terms.

To make certain that the science facts in our stories were always correct within the meaning of the latest scientific knowledge or approved theories, every story, before it was accepted, was submitted to a scientific authority in its related field who passed on the supposed facts and either approved or rejected them as unsound or unfeasible.

Beginning with the June 1929 issue of SCIENCE WONDER STORIES, I listed under the masthead of the magazine a total of 14 associate science editors in As-

tronomy, Botany, Electricity, Mathematics, Medicine, Physics and Radio, Physics, Zoology.

Among the distinguished scientists we had were: Prof. Donald H. Menzel, now Director of Harvard Observatory; Dr. Clyde Fisher, Curator the American Museum of Natural History, New York; Prof. F. E. Amstin, Dartmouth College; Prof. C. Irwin Palmer, Armour Institute of Technology; Dr. Lee de Forest, inventor of the vacuum tube, and others.

With such a formidable array of scientific talent, we were able to make certain that we purchased only the best and most worthwhile stories in science fiction, whether they were short, or book length novels. We scoured the world for authors -- not only Americans, but those from England, Germany, France and other countries. Perhaps we set our sights too high, in refusing to publish anything except stories based solely on science -- we never accepted pure fantasy stories as are the vogue today.

As I already pointed out pure science fiction authors are very scarce. Sooner or later they run out of scientific ideas or plots, and if they are the rare scholars who also excel in good literature to boot, they often find it easier and more profitable to write non-scientific stories or novels.

And let us make no mistake, the average science fiction author does not write masterpieces in English. Often the quality of the genre's literature is mediocre. There are very, very few H.G. Wells's or Edgar Allan Poe's. Their quality is much more apt to fall into the Jules Verne category.

Yet we should never lose sight of the important truth that the outstanding science fiction author need not be over-concerned with belles lettres. His wholly unliterary story, such as Jules Verne's imaginary submarine in "20,000 Leagues Under The Sea", may set scientists and technicians aflame for years, inspiring them to translate into reality that which the science fiction author's imagination blueprinted in great detail and perfection.

Curiously too, few good professional scientists are also good science fiction authors. They are, as a rule, dedicated

to their particular field, which seldom allows them to venture into uncharted depths. They must always think of their reputations first, hence they are loath to make what to them might appear as sensational predictions. The science fiction author has no such compunctions. As long as he is on safe ground as to his science, he can let his imagination soar illimitably.

Why am I so concerned in all this harangue on the science emphasis of science fiction? I think I have an excellent reason.

From the very beginning I have always strongly felt that science fiction was one of the world's greatest vehicles for the propagation of coming scientific trends, as well as an actual trial ground of man's future technical progress.

One has only to leaf through my former magazines, beginning with MODERN ELECTRICS in 1911, to fully understand this. The coming space age was fully exploited in hundreds of stories and pictures: space craft of every description, rockets, space men, satellites, space stations-- all in great profusion, month after month, year after year. Ridiculed by most -- even scientists -- science fiction never wavered in its mission to instruct the comparatively small band of believers.

Then when on Oct. 4, 1957 the actual space age burst upon a thunderstruck world with Sputnik I in orbit, Americans were dismayed and everyone was astonished, except the million science fiction fans. To them of course it was ancient hat, and how wrathful they became against our government and our scientists for the poor judgement and unprogressiveness that caused us to miss the space boat and fall into second place as a technologically leading nation.

Today our country is in mortal danger. Since Sputnik I and even before that, we are no longer first in many scientific-technical endeavors. We have sat too long on our laurels. Sooner or later we are certain to be eclipsed IN IDEAS by the U.S.S.R. unless we change our ways in outgenerating the Russians in the bold SCIENTIFIC IDEAS that have been our heritage for generations.

AT ONE TIME or another, you have sat at your father's knee and listen to words of wisdom that set the pattern of your adult life. This article presented here is "such a talk". The father of Magazine Science Fiction gives to all who love science fiction his advice of what is wrong and what should be. Hugo Gernsback, who won a "Hugo" for his pioneer work in science fiction at the recent World Convention, The PITTCON, gave this "fatherly" talk at a recent meeting of the Science Fiction Society of M. I. T. We need say nothing more, but read on and be informed.

Our sincere thanks to Mr. Gernsback for his permission to reprint it here.
-the editor

Make no mistake, the Soviet Union has already more science workers than the U. S. and their ability should never be underestimated. They overlook nothing.

Very recently they discovered science fiction and are now actively engaged in exploiting it to the hilt. They are reprinting all the best science fiction literature of the world -- our own, German, English, French and others.

I happen to know this only too well because the Moscow Book Ministry informed me that they are also reprinting my 50-year old science fiction novel, Ralph 124C 41 Plus in 1961. Inasmuch as we have no copyright agreement with the U. S. S. R. the Russians as a rule just help themselves to our literary works -- for free.

Why does the U. S. S. R. suddenly go into science fiction so assiduously? The reason is elementary. The Russians know only too well that before there can be any progress there must be ideas. And what is one of the greatest proving grounds for future scientific progress? Science fiction, of course. It is at once one of the cheapest and most universal sieves with which to catch ideas. These ideas-absurd as often they may sound -- frequently prove to be the very stimulus some sober scientist or techni-

cian needs in his work.

Take for instance H. G. Wells' Public Address loud speakers (Babble Machines), which he described so vividly in "When The Sleeper Wakes" (1899), decades before they were actually produced.

As the late and illustrious Dr. Michael Pupin, Professor of Electrical Engineering of Columbia University, and a famed inventor in his own right, pointed out, and I quote: "To discover the need for an invention and to specify it constitutes 50 per cent of the invention itself."

Let me observe at this point that in recent years science fiction unfortunately has degenerated away from the classic concept of the genre with its strong emphasis on science. There being a continuous scarcity of good science story authors, publishers of science fiction magazines and books must perforce take refuge in pseudo-science yarns and more and more fantasy. This stems also from the curious fact that far too many publishers mistakenly classify science fiction in their minds exclusively as entertainment.

Knowing little about science, they usually do not understand what science fiction really is and what it tries to accomplish.

They do not know that science fiction is educational first and foremost because it always aims to instruct. Second, it is a trail-blazer in that it heralds new ideas and trends. Third, it has a sacred mission in the future progress of the world.

May I venture here a strong conviction that science fiction, now emerging in the U. S. S. R., will certainly never be read as pure entertainment by the masses. The Russians are far too serious and practical for that. Nor will the Ministry which is to guide its future, fall into the American fantasy trap which has recently denatured science fiction to such an alarming degree in this country.

What of the future of science fiction? I see not only a very healthy renaissance for the art but I truly believe that in the future science fiction may attain a commanding rank in literature, second to none.

Several reasons that will make it more universal have already been enumerated by me. Then too, we have recently entered the space age with all its breathtaking, electrifying possibilities spreading out in every direction of the physical universe. This then in human history will be its greatest, its most fascinating age -- the age of forward-looking science and technology, the greatest age of human achievement. That means also that the hitherto weak efforts of science fiction will be eclipsed a myriad fold in the future.

It has been said that the space age belongs to the young. Equally true is the fact -- it has always been a fact since its inception -- that science fiction is the domain of youth. The gifted young mind often has the faculty of an uninhibited, intuitive, forceful imagination that can soar and ferret out the secrets of nature.

I could not cite a better illustration of this than by pointing to the small and dedicated band of science fiction adherents who constitute the Science Fiction Society of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

This to me is vastly significant. There are, to be sure, dozens of science fiction societies throughout the land, many of them even printing their own mimeographed "Fanzines" or fan magazines.

But at the moment I do not know of the existence of any other S. F. organization connected with a learned Technological faculty. Your movement here certainly augurs exceedingly well for the future of science fiction and de-

serves all encouragement as a permanent and growing movement in the U. S. Such a movement deserves official recognition and encouragement by every faculty.

Every college science fiction society should publish its own modest, yet outstanding magazine, edited by its own staff. Not only would other S. F. society members subscribe to it, but outside science fiction enthusiasts would subscribe to it as well.

Such a magazine should not be only the usual fanzine that discusses stories and authors from other magazines, but it must print its own stories authored by its own college men.

There has always been a dearth of short, short science fiction stories -- less than 1,500 words long. In a college magazine with a modest number of pages such stories would be apropos. Incidentally, if the story is good, professional magazines will buy it -- not only the regulation S. F. magazines, but periodicals such as the Saturday Evening Post, which frequently runs short features of this genre.

It seems to me that such an undertaking would be a "natural" for the Science Fiction Society of M. I. T. It has the best talent in the world, it has the access to a vast reservoir of science and technology in every form and it could easily become the leader of an important new movement in science fiction.

I fervently hope that it will succeed.

I thank you.

--- E N D ---

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