SEX, SEXUALITY AND SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS IN SCIENCE FICTION

Stella Incognita Annual Conference
Sorbonne University, Institute of Slavic Studies, Paris
April, 5 – 7 2023

Call for Papers

From puritanical prudery to exacerbated eroticism, the treatment of sexuality in works of science fiction has evolved over time to reflect this aspect of life in the societies which have produced and disseminated the texts. But the experimentation offered by the literary and visual laboratory of science fiction, and especially the impact of sexual relations within the narrative, often opens the way to more universal questions about the relationships of humans to themselves and to the Other.

Science fiction invites us to question our sexual mores and norms with a clean slate, especially in the face of a disaster (Nontraditional love, Rafael Grugman; Chroniques du Pays des Mères, Élisabeth Vonarburg) or the encounter with a radically different extraterrestrial species (Red Star, Alexandre Bogdanov). As it emphasizes how social norms are historically situated and constructed, the genre raises the issue of biopower, especially with respect to regulations governing reproduction. Whether the objective is to reduce (The Declaration Trilogy, Gemma Malley), stabilize (The Living, Anna Starobinets) or increase the number of births (The Handmaid’s Tale, Margaret Atwood), the instrumentalization of sex makes it possible to question the relationship between—or possible dissociation of—procreation and sexuality, with all the attendant biological and ethical issues. Themes such as surrogacy, hybridization (Star Trek, Gene Roddenberry), artificial insemination (Friday, Robert A. Heinlein; Pollen, Joëlle Wintrebert) and eugenics (A Brave New World, Aldous Huxley) are telling examples.

Science fiction also plays with the shifting boundaries between normality and pathology, between what frightens and what seduces, through the alienation of sexual practices and the representation of unexpected pleasures. Aliens or mutants are often endowed with extraordinary practices or sexual drives, and sometimes with "extra-normal" organs, possibly based on models drawn from contemporary biology (Sexomorphosis, Ayerdhal). It is surprising to note that works of science fiction have not offered the space for a liberation from traditional experiences of sexual pleasures and feelings as often as one might think. However, the search for and acceptance of pleasure and love has driven the transformation or transgression of sexual norms in the relations between humans in the genre. This sometimes involves developing relationships with other creatures, whether robots or aliens, humanoids or beings that are entirely other. Robots may go from the status of an advanced sex-toy to that of a loved one (Real Humans, Lars Lundström), and the love between a human and a robot may result in hybridization (Blade Runner 2049, Denis Villeneuve). Beyond the issues of attraction, feelings of love or sexual relations (The Lovers, Philip José Farmer), it is through the ability or, conversely, the inability to reproduce between species (humanoids, androids or others) that we are invited to reflect on what it means to be human, from either a philosophical or biological point of view (Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep, Philip K. Dick). The genre also invites
reflections on the physical and evolutionary limits of the human species and of living things in general (*Xenogenesis Trilogy*, Octavia Butler).

The novum of science fiction requires authors to reinvent the canons of representation by adapting them to their own universes. In these malleable worlds, changing sex may be mundane (*The Left Hand of Darkness*, Ursula K. Le Guin). Then there may be three or more genders in a given world: how should they be called? What pronoun(s) should be used to designate them, both from the point of view of the diegesis, of the author and of the reader (“Is Gender Necessary? Redux,” Ursula K. Le Guin). What importance do artificial languages or the natural languages of fiction give to this question? (*Babel 17*, Samuel Delany)

Both a mirror of our society that questions our present, and also a laboratory that tests our hypotheses concerning the future, science fiction allows for the marriage of artistic and scientific creativity. While it has not always been progressive on the subject of sexuality, reiterating moralizing precepts or reproducing the male gaze and sexist fantasies, the genre nonetheless offers a space particularly conducive to the development of imaginations that push the limits of our representations and flirt with the taboos surrounding sexuality in a given society. It has also established itself as the space *par excellence* for reflections on the impact of political and health crises, or scientific and technical revolutions, in our sexual and sentimental lives (*Children of Men*, P.D. James, cinematic adaptation by Alfonso Cuarón).

Studying the question of sexuality from a multidisciplinary angle, this conference invites the participation of researchers in literature, the arts and social sciences (politics, anthropology, sociology) and natural sciences (biology, medicine). Our aim is to reflect together on the role that sex and reproduction play in our perception and conception of the world.

More specifically, we will explore how sexuality is treated in science fiction along the following axes.

- **Construction of gender through discourse**: society, institutions;
- **Sexual relations and desire**;
- **Sexuality and biopower**: the question of reproduction, sex education;
- **Hedonism**: pleasure and enjoyment;
- **Emotional and symbolic implications**: love and attachment, psychology and psychoanalysis;
- **How sex and gender are represented in science fiction**: questions of language and style.

This list is not exhaustive. You may suggest other topics that deal with the question of sex, sexuality, sexual relations and reproduction in and through science fiction.

Proposals may focus on any medium: novels, films, series, comics, animation, painting, sculpture, video games, role-playing games. All disciplines are welcome: literary, film and cultural studies, anthropology, philosophy, sociology, history, science, technology, etc.
Submission Guidelines

Proposals should be sent to stellaincognita2023@gmail.com before January 3, 2023. Be sure to include the following: (1) an anonymous proposal including a title and summary of your communication (300 to 500 words maximum) and (2) a short biography.

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Selected Bibliography

Books


Articles/Chapters


