3.

"Where It Was Not": Varieties of Mindscapes in Fantastic Fiction

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Once upon a time – so begin traditional fairy tales in English. The appropriate turn of phrase in Hungarian is slightly different: in literal translation, it goes like "Once it was, where it was not" ("*Egyszer volt, hol nem volt*"). This simple opening statement captures the essence of all fantastic literature: the narrative gesture of setting the story in a non-existent or at least thoroughly unfamiliar and unconventional environment, a significantly different fictional universe, where the customary social and cultural norms as well as the iron laws of nature can be suspended, overcome or simply brushed aside as if they had never existed.

Critics and theorists have circumscribed this fundamental gesture of fantastic fiction in a number of ways: J.R.R. Tolkien called it "sub-creation" (Tolkien 2008, 42 ff), Darko Suvin defined it as "estrangement" (Suvin 1979, 18 ff), Robert Scholes referred to it as "fabulation" or "radical discontinuity" (Scholes 2005, 206). These and similar terms try to capture the constitutive requirement of all fantastic fiction: the verbal creation of an alternative universe that most common-sense readers would describe as non-existent, impossible, or imaginary in their empirical world. I do not wish to argue that any piece of fiction possessing some element of fantasy – or, to use Kathryn Hume's inclusive definition, "any departure from consensus reality" (Hume 1985, 21) – amounts to an alternative universe; one could easily cite famous literary texts which revolve around an isolated fantastic occurrence in an otherwise realistic fictional universe: for instance Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis", Nikolai Gogol's "The Nose" or Robert Louis Stephenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. But the majority of fantastic fiction presents a wider natural and/or social environment which in one or more of its salient features contradicts both world-1 – that is, the empirical world surrounding the author – and world-2 – the empirical world as known by readers (Hume 1985, 9 ff). George Slusser and Eric Rabkin proposed the term "mindscape" for these fictional phenomena, because, as they write:

fantasy and science fiction [are] the modern artistic forms most engaged in 'thought experiments', to generate landscapes, new or extrapolated, that are

meant to be realizations of our mental forms […] Imaginary landscapes proliferate in fantasy and science fiction.

(Slusser and Rabkin 1989, x)

Theorists of fantastic fiction have been struggling for more than half a century with the challenge of drawing a more or less well-defined line of distinction between the two most popular and best-known contemporary modes, fantasy and science fiction. In the following, I would mostly like to avoid this theoretical minefield by relying on the most generally accepted terms and approaches, but it seems prudent to note that 21st century literary and cultural trends point toward an ever-increasing hybridity of established modes and genres (more on that below).

Fantasy bears a discernible resemblance to folktales and ancient myths which inspired its emergence, but it is a relatively modern phenomenon: as Maria Nikolajeva writes, "fantasy literature owes its origins mostly to Romanticism with its interest in folk tradition, its rejection of the previous, rational-age view of the world, and its idealization of the child" (Nikolajeva 2003, 139). Nikolajeva also points out the eclectic character of modern fantasy, borrowing elements of romance, chivalric and picaresque tales, mysteries, gothic novels and other genres (ibid., 139). Classic fantasy has inherited the archetypal plot of fairy tales: the quest narrative described by Joseph Campbell, which inevitably involves some kind of journey on the part of the main hero, who faces trials and opponents as well as encountering helpers and a potential love interest on their way to accomplish their mission (see Campbell 2004, 227–33). But the most distinctive feature of fantasy is the presence of magic and the supernatural in the narrative in some form or another: it can manifest itself in magical characters (wizards, witches), creatures (fairies, ghosts, genies, elves, dwarves, giants, trolls, dragons, talking animals, etc.) or objects (wands, flying carpets, invisibility cloaks, magic swords, etc.) as well as other empirically inexplicable phenomena. The crucial role of magic is emphasized by one of the venerated "founding fathers" of modern fantasy, Tolkien, in his seminal essay on the evolving genre (which he still refers to as "fairy-stories"):

Even fairy-stories as a whole have three faces: the Mystical towards the Supernatural; the Magical towards Nature; and the Mirror of scorn and pity towards Man. *The essential face of Faërie is the middle one, the Magical*. But the degree in which the others appear (if at all) is variable, and may be decided by the individual story-teller.

(Tolkien 2008, 44, emphasis added)

At another turn, Tolkien also makes the emphatic remark that "if there is any satire present in the tale, one thing must not be made fun of, the magic itself. That must in that story be taken seriously, neither laughed at nor explained away" (Tolkien 2008, 33). The emphatic presence of magic can also be interpreted as a deliberate, even willful denial of what is commonly regarded as possible and the refusal to offer any rational explanation for this seeming impossibility: as Rosemary Jackson expresses it, fantasy "takes the real and breaks it" (quoted in Benczik 2023, 625).

While Nikolajeva foregrounds the ancestral relationship of modern fantasy to myths and folk tales, Brian Attebery points out another distinctive feature of the genre: the inspiration it draws from dreams, "daydreams, hallucination, and visionary states […] the imagery of fantasy reveals its kinship with altered states of consciousness such as hypnosis, meditation, and drug-induced vision (Attebery 1992, 7). Descriptions of these non-realistic and in some sense "unsupervised" visions open a special path to exploring the workings of the human unconscious, which makes fantasy stories particularly suitable for symbolic psychological interpretations, for instance as representations of the Jungian collective unconscious.

It is also Attebery who observes that J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* can justifiably be seen as the prototype or the "mental template" of the modern fantasy genre in three significant ways: its sharp break with reality, or a bold construction of a secondary world; the essentially positive resolution of the story that Tolkien himself referred to as "eucatastrophe" (Tolkien 2008, 75); and the sense of wonder as a liberating and inspiring emotional response to the reading experience (Attebery 1992, 14–16).

Farah Mendlesohn's widely accepted typology distinguishes four subgenres within the broader category of fantasy; out of these, two are particularly prone to inviting readers to enter their mindscapes. In portal fantasies, the Campbellian journey begins in our commonsense reality, involves a magical transportation into the secondary world of fantasy (see such classic examples as the wardrobe in C. S. Lewis's *Narnia* stories or the rabbit hole in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*) and concludes with a return to the hero's original mundane environment (Mendlesohn 2002, 173–74). Immersive fantasies, on the other hand, dispense with this plot device altogether and simply assume that readers will find their way around an alternative imaginary world with minimal introduction and explanation. "Immersive fantasy is […] closest to science fiction, and […] it makes use of ironic mimesis. […] immersive fantasy depends for its effectiveness on an assumption of realism that denies the need for explication (Mendlesohn 2002, 175). The prototype is of course *The Lord of the Rings*, but many of the more recent classics of modern fantasy belong to, or at least make use of, immersive fantasy, from *The Wheel of Time* (1990–2013) novels of Robert Jordan to *A Song of Ice and Fire*

series (better known as the *Game of Thrones* saga after the title of its first volume, since 1996) by George R. R. Martin.

The other dominant mode of modern fantastic literature, science fiction (SF for short), also displays a predilection for devising and presenting a variety of fictional universes to readers. In fact, as Carl Malmgren has argued, the most distinctive feature of the genre or mode called science fiction is not the stories told (which are mostly variations of traditional fictional plots) but the worlds in which these stories are placed (Malmgren 1991, 7). The pioneering theoretician of science fiction, Darko Suvin, has also attempted to define science fiction based on this feature. In his opinion, SF stories are centered around one or more specific fantastic inventions (which he termed "novum", relying on an earlier idea of Ernst Bloch), on the basis of which a logical and consistent alternative to world-1 is developed by the author. This strategy is described by Suvin as "cognitive estrangement": the novum (and the imaginary world predicated upon it) functions as a defamiliarizing device, which challenges readers or viewers to make a mental effort to understand the internal logic and peculiarities of the fictional world, to contemplate differences between the fictional world and their own world-2, and – in an ideal case – to turn a fresh eye on their own familiar environment (Suvin 1979, 63–79).

Both Suvin and Malmgren emphasize that SF is also distinguished by the peculiar methodology of estrangement: it has been described by various authors as a "thought experiment" (see Slusser and Rabkin 1989, x), "extrapolation" (Scholes 2005, 214), or "speculation" (Heinlein 1977, 3, 10). All these terms are notable for their scientific-rational connotations and signal a certain underlying attitude on the part of SF narratives. Science fiction as such – contrary to some very widespread but rather simple-minded notions – is certainly not "scientific", that is, not strictly based on the existing facts, theories and knowledge of either the natural or the social sciences (moreover, it very often has little connection to any science properly understood). Nonetheless the bulk of the genre

> rests upon a scientific epistemology, one which assumes [...] that the external world is both real and phenomenal. [...] This world is also axiologically neutral: it is not informed by a superordinated or metaphysical system of value; [...] At the same time, that world is subject to a system of discoverable and codifiable order, in the form of a set of interlocking 'natural laws'. These laws are understood to be universal.
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> (Malmgren 1991, 4–5)

How does this "scientific epistemology" manifest itself in SF mindscapes? Classic SF narratives are characterized by a certain imaginary rigor and consistency that is less common in fantasy: contrary to popular beliefs, "anything is not possible" within an SF universe, because one of the fundamental conventions of the mode is the requirement of a logical or rational (or at least rationalizing) explanation of the fantastic events or phenomena. Magic as such is typically banished from SF universes as a mode of interpretation contrary to the laws of nature, rational logic and causality. The unfamiliar or improbable novum most be explained, or (since such "explanations" in an SF story often amount to little more than pseudo-scientific gobbledygook) at least rationalized using factual, technical, scientific language, giving readers the illusion that the events or phenomena described are potentially possible within a scientifically conceived universe. A very useful short summary of this crucial generic difference is provided by Robert M. Philmus: "naturalistic fiction does not require scientific explanation, fantasy does not allow it, and SF both requires and allows it" (quoted by Suvin 1979, 65).[1]

Perhaps the most entertaining example of how the rationalizing convention works in SF has been provided by Fredric Brown, who illustrated that the ancient legend of Midas could easily be turned into an SF story as long as the central magical element is explained away as a super-scientific ability:

> Mr Midas, who runs a Greek restaurant in the Bronx, happens to save the life of an extraterrestrial from a far planet who is living in New York anonymously as an observer for the Galactic Federation, to which Earth for obvious reasons is not yet admitted […] The extraterrestrial, who is master of sciences far beyond ours, makes a machine which alters the molecular vibrations of Mr Midas's body so his touch will have a transmuting effect upon other objects. And so on.
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> (quoted in Parrinder 1980, 20)

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[1] It should be noted, however, that such a simplified distinction is not always applicable to more recent hybrid examples of speculative fiction such as science fantasy, in which magical creatures or heroes with inexplicable supernatural skills coexist with such SF staples as spaceships, alien planets or time travel. The *Star Wars* movie saga is often considered science fantasy due to its classic fantasy plot (the quest narrative) as well as the quasi-magical Force, which enables Jedi knights and Sith Lords to foresee the future or bend other minds to their will. In other types of generic hybrids, magic is presented as a systematic body of knowledge producing its own technology, for instance in *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* (2004) by Susanna Clarke, or the emergence of supernatural creatures like vampires and zombies are rationalized by quasi-scientific origin stories, e.g., in the novel *I Am Legend* (1954) by Richard Matheson (which has been adapted to film three times) or in the video game franchise *The Last of Us* (since 2013), which was also adapted for a television series by HBO in 2023. For details of these hybrid generic examples, see Benczik (2020) and Limpár (2024).

(By the way, it is worth noting that this rewriting of the Midas legend with its superhuman ET living undercover in New York City contains the core of the novum presented in the delightful SF parody movie *Men in Black* [1997].)

Another manifestation of the scientific epistemology is the future-oriented outlook of SF: since the 19th century origins of the genre coincided with the discovery of time and change as key factors in the history of the universe, earthly life and human civilization (as the development of modern geology, evolutionary biology and the concept of entropy in physics testify), SF was from its inception (especially under the formative influence of H. G. Wells) very interested in future potentials and possibilities of science, technology, social development, and similar issues.

Accordingly, some of the most conventional "nova" or devices of SF include interplanetary or interstellar space travel, the possibility of time travel, the existence of – and encounter with – extraterrestrial intelligent beings, the creation of artificial intelligence, improvements and extensions of the human body and mind, various technological breakthroughs, or substantial and often drastic changes to the ecological or social conditions of human life, such as devastating epidemics, nuclear wars, ecological catastrophes, overpopulation, etc. Each of these nova is merely the point of departure for the authorial imagination: a good science fiction story is invariably interested in the impact and consequences of such fictitious developments on humans, which means picturing an alternative version of human community – in other words, an imaginary world or a mindscape.

In the following, I wish to present my own short survey of "mindscapism" by offering a bit of subjective exploration of the fantastic worlds of science fiction, my primary field of research. While fantasy mindscapes also deserve a detailed examination, I am not familiar enough with the length and breadth of the genre to give it the proper treatment it deserves. Therefore, in the rest of the essay, while references to fantasy occasionally pop up, the focus of the discussion is restricted to SF.

There and Back – the Significance of the Journey

Literary historians in search of the origins of fantastic genres invariably identify imaginary journeys as one of the precursors of modern fantastic fiction. This is hardly surprising, given the central significance of the journey motif in ancient myths and the history of literature in general: it is both the most common plot element and an archetypal metaphor for human life.

The popularity of the fictional accounts of all sorts of journeys is partly also explained by the fact that in premodern communities the great majority of the population rarely if ever had the opportunity to leave their dwelling place, and so were naturally

curious about foreign lands, the wider world, the "land beyond the seas", etc. Travelers were welcome guests both at peasants' homes and royal halls, and their "strange and wonderful" tales typically included unverifiable or flatly untrue stories. Reality and fantasy freely mingled in these accounts and their audience neither could nor wanted to establish their truth value. The travelogues of Marco Polo or Amerigo Vespucci were no less fantastic to contemporary audiences than the voyages of Ulysses, St. Brendan, or Sinbad the Sailor. The voyage is the most ancient and most convenient narrative strategy to transport the narrator (and the audience) to an alternative universe, as such diverse stories as Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) or Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) testify: it can be a faraway island, a distant country, or a hidden valley, where the natural surroundings can be as different from world-1 as the human inhabitants.

By the late 19th century, the seemingly endless possibilities of fictional "else-wheres" had come close to exhaustion on Earth, as the entire surface of the planet had been discovered and mapped by Western travelers and geographers. Fantasy and SF reacted to this narrative challenge in characteristically different ways: while fantasy authors invented secondary universes hidden from plain sight, accessible only with the help of magic (Mendlesohn's portal fantasies), SF invented two distinctively modern modes of transport to new mindscapes: space travel and time travel. Space travel (not as a didactic metaphorical tale of ancient and early modern authors but as a technically feasible venture) first featured in Jules Verne's famous *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865), and H. G. Wells presented the first successful landing on a celestial body in *The First Men in the Moon* (1901), but it became a widely popular means of fictional escape in the early 20th century, especially in popular American SF magazines. Following in the footsteps of H. G. Wells's enormously influential *War of the Worlds* (1898), in which imperialist Martians attack Earth and attempt to subjugate humans, Mars emerged as the favored location of extraterrestrial adventures, especially in the long series of Barsoom novels by Edgar Rice Burroughs (begun with *A Princess of Mars* [1912]), whose hero, John Carter, is transported from the American West to the planet of Mars and fights heroic battles against villains and monsters defending a beautiful princess, in an essentially fantasy-like setting (an early example of today's science fantasy subgenre). In his wake, Mars achieved such popularity in interwar pulp SF that Ray Bradbury's famous short story collection, *The Martian Chronicles* (1950), could already reflect on the history of Mars and Martian civilization not only within the bounds of its own fictional universe, but also as a reference to genre history. For post-war SF readers, Bradbury's Mars is perhaps the most memorable image of the planet: rather than a site for a romantic-melodramatic adventure story, it has been transformed into a haunted place of nostalgia and yearning,

where emigrant Earthmen are confronted with the ruins of an extinct civilization as well as by their own bittersweet memories of the culture they have left behind. Bradbury is entirely uninterested in rational extrapolation or the technological wonders of the future: he utilizes SF conventions as a transparent disguise for allegorical and poetic tales about the human condition, which made him very popular also among "mainstream" readers.

More realistic SF stories have been typically preoccupied with Mars as the first target planet for human colonization of the solar system; an outstanding example is Kim Stanley Robinson's excellent trilogy (*Red Mars*, *Green Mars* and *Blue Mars*, 1993–97) about the terraformation of Mars, that is, how Mars is turned into an ecosphere capable of supporting human habitation.

Before long, imaginary space travelers have left not only Earth but the entire solar system behind, as new and ingenious devices were invented to overcome the vast interstellar distances, such as generation starships or faster-than-light space travel. As Brian Stableford writes, "the idea of flight into space became the central myth of SF" (Clute and Nicholls 1995, 1135), and its vehicle, the spaceship, is one of the key symbols of the genre. Michel Foucault's observation about ships is equally applicable to, if not even more fitting for, spaceships: "The ship is the heterotopia *par excellence* […] a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea" (Foucault 1986, 27). Spaceships offer a number of analogical and symbolic opportunities in SF stories: they may function as the equivalent of a horse or a sailing vessel in Western or sea adventure stories (think of Han Solo as a clear equivalent of a roving gunslinger or the adventurous pirate with his battered old ship the *Millennium Falcon* in the Star Wars series); they may be frightening war machines embodying aggression and terror (such as the Imperial Star Destroyers, also from *Star Wars*); they may represent the horse-driven wagons of the early pioneers, in a mission to discover the final and infinite frontier of space, as both the title and the opening credits of the iconic *Star Trek* series expressed. It can also function as a miniature of human society like generation starship stories, in which a large group of people venture on an interstellar journey lasting for several centuries, knowing (or occasionally forgetting) that only their descendants will arrive at the destination, as in Brian Aldiss's *Non-Stop* (1958). A ship can be an ark carrying the survivors of a destroyed civilization, or a sentient being with an artificial intelligence on its own. One of the most intriguing spaceships in SF history, presented in Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* (1973), invites most of the above interpretations but offers no definitive answers: a gigantic cylindrical structure enters the solar system, and its human explorers find a perfect miniature ecosystem in it complete with land and sea, animals, even an artificially sped-up evolutionary process.

Time after Time – Journeys into the Future and the Past

The other imaginary piece of man-made technology that achieved a similar iconic status in SF is the time machine, perhaps the most distinctly SF mode of transport, even though it manifestly contradicts the generally accepted theories of the universe. Einstein's relativity theory allows time travel into the future by means of space travel at close-to-light speed (because at such enormous velocity the time dilation causes the astronaut to age a lot more slowly than their friends and relatives left behind on a planet) but travel into the past is considered impossible by the scientific consensus. Thus, time travel and all its varieties provide yet another good example of why SF is not really about science and extrapolation but rather about rationalized wish fulfilment: once the impossible is assumed (that is, time travel IS somehow possible), all the consequences of the imaginary hypothesis can be unpacked in a neat, logical order.

The idea that a special kind of machine could enable humans to travel both forward and backward in time, which is nothing but the "fourth dimension" of space, is arguably the most significant invention of H. G. Wells in the eponymous novel published in 1895, which spawned a huge following among subsequent authors. Wells chose to send his anonymous Time Traveller into the far future, where he finds the degenerate descendants of humanity, the Eloi and the Morlocks, and even witnesses the heat death of the entire solar system millions of years from now. Wells was relatively unconcerned with both the pseudoscience of the theory and the detailed description of the machine itself: from the scattered observations provided by the narrator, the whole device reminds the reader of a lavishly decorated bicycle. He was, however, very skillful in the description of the journey through time (the visual effect of the days, months and seasons racing past the observer is captured with a remarkable imagination, as if the text was meant for a movie script) and presented a pessimistic evolutionary fable of the ultimate demise of human civilization. In George Pal's famous 1960 movie version, the machine was turned into a kind of sled with a satellite dish attached to its back, while in the much inferior 2002 remake it was probably inspired by the helicopter.

Later SF writers developed multiple theories of time travel, and imagined the experience in a number of ways: one common variety is a kind of elevator cabin which carries people back and forth across the centuries, as in Isaac Asimov's *The End of Eternity* (1955); or a door opening into other temporal dimensions, or just an accidental timeslip into another historical period, as in Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) – the first in a long series of stories and movies exploiting the comic potential of the confrontation between people of different historical epochs. A recurring source of excitement is the visit to certain popular historical destinations, such as the age of the dinosaurs, the height of the Roman Empire, or the crucifixion of

Jesus Christ: the past comes alive, age-old mysteries may be unraveled, and there is a strong temptation to change the course of history by for example killing a powerful source of evil like Adolf Hitler.

The mindscapes of time travel offer a different sort of thrill and pleasure from the alien planets reached by spaceships: while space metonymically stands for the mysterious unknown, stepping out of the flow of time and changing past events offers the chance of liberation from the oppression of history – even though time travel stories often come to the conclusion that such freedom is illusory, as all deeds and decisions have their consequences. The well-known time paradoxes (the theoretical opportunity of a traveler to accidentally kill his own earlier self or an ancestor, thus eliminating himself and therefore the act of murder as well) and their melodramatic potential were exploited in a number of ways by pulp SF writers from the 1920s and 30s on, and the possible impact of any modification of the past also offered a number of plot opportunities. One memorable version is for instance Ray Bradbury's "A Sound of Thunder" (1952), in which a prehistoric hunting trip goes awry, and a seemingly insignificant alteration of the past (the trampling of a small butterfly) changes the far future – the visitor's present – beyond recognition. A comic version of the potential consequences of the modification of the past was presented in the *Back to the Future* movie series (1985–90), in which the main hero, Marty McFly, first has to intervene in the 1950s to bring his own parents together (and thus save his own life), then to repair the life of his own future older self and his children. The thriller version of time travel was filmed in the *Terminator* series (1984–2019), in which the nearly unstoppable killing machine arrives from the post-apocalyptic future to prevent the birth of a future heroic leader of humanity. These two franchises had an enormous impact on popular audiences and contributed significantly to the mainstream acceptance of time travel as a plausible plot idea. Other authors developed intricate systems of parallel universes created by such alterations, often protected by a kind of time police so that the overall course of human history should be maintained.

A special subset of SF stories concerned with historical time do not utilize time machines at all: alternate history novels and stories start from the assumption that certain historical events did not take place or their outcome was different, then imagine the consequences of this modified history. This "game" was invented by professional historians in the interwar period, but gained widespread popularity in SF. Outstanding examples include Keith Roberts's *Pavane* (1968), which pictures a 20th-century Britain in which Reformation was suppressed after the assassination of Queen Elisabeth, the Catholic church remained dominant all over Europe, and consequently, both technological and social development languishes at roughly a mid-19th century level, with-

out locomotives or electricity, and a form of the feudal system remains dominant. Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee* (1953) describes a 20th-century USA in which the South won the Civil War; in Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) the territory of the USA has been divided between the victorious Axis powers, Germany and Japan. Or, to cite a more recent example of a non-SF writer, Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007) is a mystery story set in a Jewish district of Sitka, Alaska, where Eastern European Jews were allowed to settle after the attempt of founding Israel failed. The success of such alternate history narratives ultimately depends not on the axiomatic twist of history but the originality and creativity of the author's imagination, and whether they can bring such an improbable world to life.[2]

Another subgenre within SF which operates with a temporal dislocation and estrangement is so-called post-apocalyptic stories. The term "apocalypse" (derived of course from the common name of the final book of the New Testament, John's Revelations) refers to any kind of devastating catastrophe that has obliterated contemporary human civilization, be it nuclear war, a worldwide epidemic, or some version of natural disaster (global flood, ice age, collision with a celestial object, ecological collapse, etc.). Most of these stories describe the catastrophe and its consequences on human society with hindsight, accounting for the collapse of modern sophisticated, technological civilization and the ensuing chaos, out of which some neo-primitive form of existence gradually emerges, which often resembles the Stone Age (individuals and small bands fighting for survival and limited resources) or a version of feudal-medieval, strictly hierarchical social structures with distinct agrarian, warrior and priestly castes. The first such story in English, *The Last Man*, was written by Mary Shelley in 1826, and the subgenre enjoyed a significant vogue around the end of the 19th century (probably as a form of *fin-de-siecle* decadence) with such notable examples as Richard Jefferies' *After London* (1885) or Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), mentioned above. But the genre's popularity peaked after Hiroshima and the realistic possibility of a global nuclear war. Even such mainstream authors as the British Aldous Huxley (*Ape and Essence*, 1948) or the French Robert Merle (*Malevil*, 1972) contributed to the subgenre's grim visions. Russian authors Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's classic novel, *Roadside Picnic* (1972), in which reckless adventurers make occasional visits to the mysterious and strictly forbidden Zone left behind by some kind of unexplained catastrophe, was turned into a haunting movie by Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky in 1979 under the title *Stalker*. An outstanding example of the subgenre is Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle*

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[2]   Hungarian versions of alternative history are quite rare and not particularly well-known even among Hungarian readers, but a recent essay of Áron Domokos offers a valuable survey of Hungarian authors' alternative history stories related to Nazi Germany (see Domokos 2024).

for Leibowitz (1960), in which human history is seen as a black comedy, suggesting that humanity will commit its fatal mistakes again and again. Mordant black humor characterizes another classic satirical apocalyptic novel, Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* (1963), in which a fictional artificial form of ice freezes the world's water at room temperature. A recent and extremely bleak treatment of the post-apocalyptic theme is *The Road* (2006) by Cormac McCarthy, in which a father and his son roam through the territory of the former US destroyed by some unspecified disaster, and humans have turned to cannibalism for survival.

Post-apocalyptic settings became popular in movies after the surprise success of the Australian film *Mad Max* (1979), but often as a backdrop to some barbaric-romantic adventure story with scant attention to consistency and logic. A more creative use of the post-apocalyptic setting is made by *12 Monkeys* (1995), which reconstructs the global decimation of humanity by a deadly virus from a future perspective and combines it with a time-travel plotline. The collapse of human civilization caused by a worldwide viral or bacterial epidemic, originally conceived in Shelley's *The Last Man*, remains very popular in 21st century cinema, with such examples as *28 Days Later* (2002), *I Am Legend* (2007), *Zombieland* (2009) or the TV series *Station Eleven* (2021), based on Emily St. John Mandel's 2014 novel of the same title. Such stories gained an eerie relevance from the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic that swept the globe between 2020 and 2023, but luckily did not reach catastrophic proportions. Nevertheless, it served as a stark reminder that certain SF mindscapes may resemble actual future events uncomfortably closely.

The Familiar in the Alien – Other Planets, Other Species

So far, I have predominantly dealt with means of travel across time and space. But ultimately, both spaceships and time machines function as mere facilitating devices to transport humans into extraterrestrial or extra-temporal mindscapes where the authorial imagination may roam free. Besides the spaceships and time machines, the other most iconic images of SF are those of a foreign planet and the extraterrestrial alien. However, a surprisingly large number of SF authors have not made a huge mental effort to imagine genuinely strange and unusual environments on other planets. Many of the well-known SF mindscapes located on other planets display recognizable similarities with familiar earthly landscapes, human communities, or historical narratives. The ecology of alien planets are often convenient magnifications of a characteristic earthly ecosystem into worldwide proportions, such as the rainforest, the desert, the ocean, or the polar ice cap. The inhabitants of such planets are commonly pictured as humanoids in various stages of biological or historical evolution, which offers a fictional chance

for encounters with prehistoric hunters, warlike nomads, or some variation of ancient or medieval civilizations.

A satirical twist to this back-to-the-past-through-space plotline was added by French author Pierre Boulle in his *Planet of the Apes* (1963), in which space travelers land on a faraway planet to find the role of humans and apes reversed: apes are intelligent, while humans have degenerated into savages, and when the protagonists return to Earth, they are greeted by a gorilla in a car. The story was turned into an American movie version in 1968 (and subsequently into an entire franchise with nearly a dozen items) with an added conceptual breakthrough: rather than returning to Earth in a spaceship, the main hero is confronted with the half-sunken Statue of Liberty at the end, which makes him realize that he has never left Earth, only travelled into its future.

Another group of SF stories utilizes historical analogies on a galactic scale. Isaac Asimov's famous *Foundation* series (1942–1993) imagines a declining Galactic Empire on the clear analogy of the Roman Empire, with the splendid central planet of Trantor representing Rome, the imperial capital. His novum is the introduction of a brilliant social scientist, Hari Seldon, who is able by mathematical modelling to predict the future and establishes two Foundations to shorten the looming Dark Age. Frank Herbert's similarly renowned *Dune* cycle (1965–1985) draws heavily on the history and culture of desert-dwelling nomadic Arabs and their sudden fierce onslaught on the Middle East and North Africa after their conversion to Islam in the 7th century, when he pictures the fremen from the desert planet of Arrakis united by a messianic character for a jihad that topples the reigning galactic emperor and the traditional ruling aristocracy.

A genuinely creative alienness was imagined by Ursula K. Le Guin in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and other stories that take place on the planet of Gethen. The Gethenians are generally quite similar to humans except for one crucial difference: they are bisexual, and may "go into kemmer" (become male or female) only for a few days each month. As a result, Gethenian society knows no gender distinctions, extended families are organized around matriarchs, and visiting humans from Earth are seen as pathetic monsters who are permanently in kemmer, but only in one way. Le Guin's subversion of the most fundamental dividing line of human society leads to very interesting social and cultural ramifications.

Another mysteriously memorable alien planet is pictured in Polish writer Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* (1961), in which scientists studying a planet-sized intelligent entity from a space station find that their dreams and longings are given solid shape by the planet. The mystery of Solaris remains an enigma in the novel: the interpretative efforts of humans seem to reflect their own prejudices and desires rather than the vastly superior and inscrutable intelligence which appears genuinely divine. It was turned into

a meditative film by Andrei Tarkovsky in 1972, while an American movie version was created in 2002.

The representation of aliens in SF has been decisively shaped by the first alien-invasion story in the history of the genre, H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1898). It handed down an infinitely popular plotline (the invasion of a malign extraterrestrial race) as well as an influential visualization of aliens as disgusting, blood-thirsty monsters resembling a kind of giant octopus (a gigantic head with sixteen tentacles). In his only novel about space travel, *The First Men in the Moon*, Wells presented the dystopian community of the ant-like Selenites living in a giant hive. The huge popularity of Wells's works gave rise to the so-called "bug-eyed monster" tradition in American pulp SF in the interwar period, in which dangerous and repulsive alien creatures were usually derived from similarly repellent animal species (insects, reptiles, predators), either by increasing them into human or superhuman size or combining their various features into a chimerical beast. Perhaps the best-known example is Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* (1959), in which mankind faces a disgusting arachnoid alien species ominously referred to as "Bugs". Such galactic wars between the empire of humans and a rival empire of aggressive aliens display thinly disguised parallels to contemporary military confrontations, especially the Cold War. Stealthy alien-invasion stories – often featuring shape-shifting aliens imitating humans or parasites taking possession of human bodies and minds – also became very popular during the peak period of Cold War paranoia. A famous example is the movie *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), a combination of SF and horror, just like the most recent and famous archetype of the alien monster, the murderous and parasitic creatures from the *Alien* movie franchise (1979–2024). The original Wellsian recipe of a direct and overwhelming alien invasion was recycled around the end of the 20th century by such movies as *Independence Day* (1996) or the modernized remake of *The War of the Worlds* (2005).

The interpretation of monstrous aliens is one of the popular pastimes of SF criticism: they offer convenient analogies with the horrifying Other, be it a different nation or race, the threat of military or economic imperialism, or the focus of some other disembodied anxiety. The cliché has also been the subject of occasional ironic subversion, as in Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953), in which the benevolent aliens landing on Earth to bring a new period of peace and plenty refuse to reveal themselves for years, because their physical appearance closely resembles the devils of Christian mythology. The satirical parody of the alien-invasion theme is epitomized in the *Men in Black* movie series (1997–2019), which begins with the funny revelation that the aliens are among us – indeed New York is teeming with them – but a special, super-secret agency is making sure that ordinary humans do not notice them, or, if they do, they will not remember.

Benevolent aliens are much rarer in SF, and they often appear as creatures with divine powers and mysterious intentions. This mystery was perhaps most successfully conveyed in one of the best SF movies of all time, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), which was directed by Stanley Kubrick and written by Arthur C. Clarke. The aliens never appear in the movie: all humans can see is the perfectly shaped black monoliths and other references to their existence. Other notable movies which rely on the enigma of extraterrestrial alienness, as well as the practical challenges of how to contact or communicate with an entirely different intelligent species, include *Contact* (1997), the story of which was written by eminent astronomer Carl Sagan, and *Arrival* (2016), which was based on the excellent short story "The Story of Your Life" (1998) by Ted Chiang. If non-belligerent aliens do appear, they are often presented in the tradition of the UFO hysteria of the 1950s, as slender, somewhat smallish humanoids who travel in saucer-shaped spaceships, as in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) by Steven Spielberg.

All in all, if one surveys the length and breadth of the SF genre, the novum of space travel has rarely spawned comparable nova in terms of genuinely alien environments. On the whole, we can accept as valid the observation of Patrick Parrinder, who has written that

> it is not possible for man to imagine what is *utterly* alien to him; the utterly alien would also be meaningless. To give meaning to something is also, inescapably, to 'humanize' it or to bring it within the bounds of our anthropomorphic world view.
> (quoted by Malmgren 1991, 13)

Conclusion

The incredible richness of the SF literary tradition makes even such a broad and selective survey by necessity woefully incomplete. I have not even touched upon another major strand of SF that deals with artificial intelligence in its manifold varieties, from such human-made creatures as robots, androids and cyborgs to supercomputers and their intricate networks known in the empirical world since the 1980s as the Internet, but in the SF genre more commonly as "cyberspace", a term popularized by William Gibson in his 1984 novel *Neuromancer*. The mind-blowing speed of development witnessed in computer technology and wireless telecommunication in the past half-century, as well as the breakthroughs achieved in artificial manipulation of human DNA, made speculation about the "posthuman era" both current and fashionable in the early 21st century, opening up another wealth of potential mindscapes for the SF imagi-

nation (for an intriguing discussion in the context of privacy and posthumanism, see Panka 2022).

So, what to make of such a dizzying variety of mindscapes of fantastic fiction? The most conventional observation one can make is that they demonstrate an age-old desire of humanity to escape the narrow confines of the real and the possible and to overcome the limitations of space and time, as well as human biology and society. "Sub-creation", to use Tolkien's term once more, is a powerful compulsion of human imagination, and it should neither be written off as "escapist" nor dismissed as "irrelevant", since the defiant and subversive creativity displayed by the mindscapes of fantastic authors offers uniquely valuable perspectives on the human mind, its yearnings and its predicaments, as well as the challenges and pitfalls of human society and culture.

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