Future/Present: The End of Science Fiction

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'We no longer feel that we penetrate the future. Futures penetrate us.' (John Clute)¹

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Science fiction is (once again) undergoing an identity crisis; or, to put it more extremely, science fiction is (once again) coming to an end.² Like other postmodern subjects, it has become fragmented and decentred; its boundaries have become fluid and its outlines blurred. Science fiction is now, more clearly than ever, a subject-in-process; its erstwhile 'fixed' identity has become indeterminate and changeable. The texts which today constitute it as a generic field have themselves become widely dispersed and wildly heterogeneous, and/as its interactions with time and history have undergone a series of sea-changes. This essay is an attempt to think about science fiction at once as an 'impossible' genre within the context of postmodernity and a particularly relevant discursive field within the same context.³

In an earlier essay, 'Specular SF: Postmodern Allegory', I explored 'the allegorical impulse' in some postmodern speculative novels – including Kathy Acker's Empire of the Senseless, Richard Brautigan's In Watermelon Sugar, and Anna Kavan's Ice – arguing that, in these texts,

what has been effaced/obscured is the historical nature of our own present, so that the imagery of SF, whose conventional role is to point out the certainty that things will be different in the future, frequently ... becomes a means of collapsing the future back onto the present in a way that removes the historical specificity and contingency of that present.⁴
Here I want to explore further the implications for genre science fiction of this ‘collapse’ of the future into the present, as implied in the transformation of science fiction from genre to discursive field. I also want to look at science fiction’s own (occasional) recognition of itself as a casualty of this ‘collapsed future.’

As most readers will appreciate, from a common-sense perspective genre science fiction is quite alive and well. In fact, its commercial viability in book form, and as film, television, and graphic-novel material, has probably never been greater. Even as I write this, the film version of Robert Heinlein’s action-filled young-adult novel *Starship Troopers* (1959) has just completed its first run in Canadian and U.S. cinemas, and Arthur C. Clarke’s latest novel, *3001: The Final Odyssey* (1997), has been doing good business on a whole raft of bestseller lists.

Clarke’s novel demonstrates an interesting lack of narrative energy, which I read as particularly significant, given my present concerns. *3001* is written in the straight-ahead, no-nonsense, transparent prose which for decades has demonstrated science fiction’s close formal affinities to the realist novel. Like much of ‘classic’ science fiction, it is optimistic about the future of human beings and about their inevitable expansion into the galaxy. Interestingly, however, it is also virtually plot-free. If we think of plot – that *sine qua non* of the Aristotelian narrative – as what drives the conventional realist text, then we find at the heart of Clarke’s novel a curious enervation, as if Clarke had finally hit a narrative wall in his decades-long recounting of ‘classic’ science-fiction stories. In fact, *3001* suggests another close formal relative, the classic utopian narrative – Thomas More’s original *Utopia* (1516) or Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (1888), for example – in which nothing much happens while the protagonist is introduced to features of the fictional utopian world. We might think of this as a shift (back) from plot-as-development-through-time to plot-as-development-through-space (a thought to which I will return below). The almost complete lack of narrative drive in Clarke’s novel makes it paradigmatic of the conceptual stasis which has overtaken genre science fiction within the context of contemporary culture.

Every genre has a kind of historical ‘origin’, the consequence of complex formal and political moments and events. It may be that the particular moment which provided the context for the appearance and development of conventional genre science fiction has passed – in this, it would be no different from Greek tragedy or the