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Review of Seo-Young Chu's *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?: A Science-Fictional Theory of Representation*

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Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep? A Science-Fictional Theory of Representation. By Seo-

Young Chu

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Science fiction, wrote Darko Suvin in "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre," is "the literature of cognitive estrangement" the genre that arises out of the dialectical encounter between that which is real and that which is imagined, impossible or yet to be.[1] The estrangements of science fiction defamiliarize our empirical, everyday reality, motivating through the depiction of radical difference a new and profound rerecognition of our surroundings; cognition acts as estrangement's reality principle, tethering it to what is real, lest it lose all sense and become a mere flight of fancy. Science fiction in this way becomes in Suvin's hands a literature not of anticipation but of analogy; science fiction does not predict the future but rather allegorizes what is already real in the present.

This definition—which firmly situates science fiction as a genre of the political left, as both sub- and supragenre of utopia—remains at the center of science fiction studies nearly forty years after its first articulation, with new interventions in the field still typically beginning either with the acceptance of Suvin's terms or else the positing of some alternative approach. In *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?,* Seo-Young Chu sets out in precisely this way, provocatively

announcing her project as "Suvin's definition turned inside out" (3). For Chu, science fiction is not an antirealist literature of the impossible but rather a mimesis of those alien things that exist despite their strangeness; science fiction describes those literary practices that seek to represent "cognitive estranging objects" that are real but only partially thinkable by the human mind—what Chu calls "objects of wonder" (5). Trauma, cyberspace, and globalization are three such objects, nonimaginary and partially measurable and yet, at the same time, elusive, excessive, and indistinct; each is the focus of a chapter of Chu's book.

Chu's startling and ambitious project therefore seeks in the end to turn the existing tradition of science fiction studies on its head, in the process transmogrifying all genres of literature and thought into variations on science fiction. Surrealism becomes the science fictional mimesis of dreams; detective fiction is the science fictional mimesis of "the mystery of ratiocination" (9); supernatural fictions like Harry Potter or the Twilight series are the science fictional mimesis of the fierce, multiple subjectivities of young adulthood. Even the most baseline realist text—something like Balzac or Dickens—becomes, in Chu's terms, "actually a 'weak' or low-intensity variety of science fiction, one that requires relatively little energy to accomplish its representational task insofar as its referents . . . are readily susceptible to representation" (7). *All* representation, after all, is to some extent or another predicated on the dialectic between cognition/referentiality and estrangement/fictionality; representation without cognition would be quite literally unthinkable, while representation without *some* level of estrangement would simply be the thing itself. Consequently, *everything* is science fiction, at least a little bit.

The approach to science fictions (and to artistic and literary production more generally) laid out by *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?* is in many ways tremendously exciting, especially in the book's positioning of lyricism as the necessary "torque" required to "*convert* referents ordinarily *averse* to representation into referents accessible to representation" (67).Whereas most theorists of science fiction focus on the genre's more prosaic characteristics, Chu reimagines science fiction as a long-lost cousin of poetry, with stunning insight. Chu's fascinating epistemological approach likewise makes an important case

for the centrality of science fiction for both theories of literature and theories of the world as such. Because "to make something available for representation is to make it knowable" (75) science fiction becomes an ever-more necessary technology for knowledge in a fast-changing world like ours, where cognitively estranging objects and elusive referents proliferate by the day (81).

Having established her method in the book's lengthy and exceptional introduction, Chu turns in each of the five chapters to explicating her theory through readings of seminal science fiction works, drawn from Chu's impressively encyclopedic knowledge of the genre. (The book's inventive epilogue ultimately imagines these as only the thinnest sliver of the "much larger hypothetical book containing an infinite number of chapters that correspond to an infinite number of cognitively estranging objects and phenomena" [247].) Chapter 1, on globalization, is the book's best, tracing globalization, itself a cognitively estranging object, through an extended application of Fredric Jameson's strategy for cognitive mapping. Chu argues that science fiction literalizes the "time-space compression" that David Harvey notes characterizes postmodernity (94), and that this is precisely why "those who think and write about globalization have long been drawn to the language of science fiction" (88–89). Chapter 2 similarly traces the creation and application of the idea of cyberspace, especially in the works of William Gibson; chapters 3 and 4 concern in different ways "the science-fictionalization of trauma," first with respect to the cognitive excess of PTSD and shell shock and second with respect to the "postmemory" of diasporic Korean-American writers in the United States.

But it is chapter 5, "titled Robot Rights," that ultimately exposes important limits to Chu's otherwise fruitful approach. Chu's insistence on the mimetic dimension of science fiction—and her explicit rejection of allegory as, perhaps, the only thing in the universe that *isn't* science fiction (75)—leads her to conclude that stories about robots *must* at their core be about the potential moral status of nonhuman and partially human artificial life. Indeed, she traces this strange claim as far back as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), written in an era (then as now) when the creation of artificial persons was pure fantasy. Stories about robots are manifestly about nonexistent, imaginary referents—there are no such creatures anywhere. The real referents of

these stories are instead the tragically nonimaginary conditions of unjust discrimination and labor exploitation they unmistakably allegorize. Robot stories are indeed, as Chu writes, "increasingly important as a way of representing *human* rights," but not (as she claims) because technology is outfitting more and more people with more and better technological prostheses—it is rather because imagining robots, aliens, and other inscrutable others has only ever been a allegorical way of confronting, and coming to terms with, the vast diversity within the human family. The referent for robot fictions is not robot consciousness, but our own.

Indeed, despite her protests, most of Chu's excellent work really amounts to Suvinian/Jamesonian allegory sailing under the flag of metaphor. Chu attempts to draw a proposed distinction between allegory and science fiction this way:

<EXT>The purpose of allegory is not to refer to a specific object but to incite the reader's mind to exegesis. Meanwhile, the purpose of science fiction is not to instigate exegetical activity in the reader's mind but to represent a cognitively estranging referent. Just as a transitive verb requires an object to complete its meaning ("to represent _____," "to address _____") science fiction requires an object—or more precisely a referent—to complete its function. (76)</EXT>

But to say, for instance, that science fiction represents trauma by literalizing the way it exceeds our cognitive ordering of temporal and spatial via such devices as time travel and out-of-body experiences (156) is exactly to say that science fiction allegorizes the experience of trauma. Such a representational act necessarily invites a critical exegesis; the reader is required to draw some interpretive connection between the artistic representation and its supposed referent or else the story would simply be fantastic nonsense. After all, the victim of trauma does not *literally* travel in time or out of her body, any more than the explorer of cyberspace *literally* manifests inside the computer, the globalized world *literally* manifests a world-soul, or *literal* robots make *literal* demands for moral recognition and equal

rights. Exegesis and interpretation remain fundamental to the science fictional representational strategy Chu calls "counterfigurative literalization" (68)—and the synaptic gap that connects cognitively estranging *referents* to their science fictional *representations* is precisely the gap of allegory itself.

In this way, Chu does in fact turn Suvin inside out, in a much more direct sense than perhaps she realizes. Where Suvinian criticism has tended to focus on science fiction's dimension of estrangement, taking the cognition as read, Chu puts estrangement to one side and focuses instead on the principle of cognition—on enumerating the nonimaginary, nonhypothetical referents that lend science fiction objects their undeniable "vivacity, solidity, persistence, and giveness" (68). But in the end we pass through Chu's intriguing reversal of priorities and emerge again on the other side to find that the allegorical interpretive strategies suggested by the logic of estrangement are (still) the real key to the genre. The only alternative to allegory would be the category error Chu flirts with throughout *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?,* before committing to it finally in the struggle for robot rights in her chapter 5: mistaking science fiction for something other than a fiction, mistaking the map for the truth of the territory, mistaking the dream for something real.

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[1] Darko Suvin, "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre," *College English* 34.3 (1972): 372.