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Colonialism

and the EMERGENCE of

Science Fiction

John Rieder

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To David F. Rieder, who gave me science fiction;
and, with love, to Cristina Bacchilega

The country that is more developed industrially only shows,
to the less developed, the image of its own future.

—Karl Marx, Preface to the German Edition of *Capital*

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Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction

chapter one

Introduction

The Colonial Gaze and the Frame of Science Fiction

The question organizing this book concerns the connection between the early history of the genre of English-language science fiction and the history and discourses of colonialism. Consider first a brief example. Those searching out the origins of science fiction in English have often pointed to classical and European marvelous journeys to other worlds as an important part of its genealogy (e.g., Philmus 37–55; Aldiss 67–89; Stableford 18–23). It makes sense that if science fiction has anything to do with modern science (I am deferring the problem of defining “science fiction” until the fourth section of this chapter), the Copernican shift from a geocentric to a heliocentric understanding of the solar system provides a crucial point where the ancient plot of the marvelous journey starts becoming something like science fiction, because the Copernican shift radically changed the status of other worlds in relation to our own. An Earth no longer placed at the center of the universe became, potentially, just one more among the incalculable plurality of worlds. Of all the marvelous journeys to other worlds written in Galileo’s seventeenth century, Cyrano de Bergerac’s *The Comical History of the States and Empires of the Moon and the Sun* (first translated into English in 1656) is the one that science fiction scholars have expressed the greatest admiration for (see Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* 103–106). All the scholars I’ve cited would agree that the main work of Cyrano’s satire is hardly a matter of celestial mechanics, however. Its crux is the way it mocks, parodies, criticizes, and denaturalizes the cultural norms of his French contemporaries. The importance of his satire has far less to do with Copernicus’s taking the Earth out of the center of the solar system than with Cyrano’s taking his own culture out of the center of the human race, making it no longer definitive of the range of human possibilities.

The example of *Cyrano* suggests that the disturbance of ethnocentrism, the achievement of a perspective from which one's own culture is only one of a number of possible cultures, is as important a part of the history of science fiction, as much a condition of possibility for the genre's coming to be, as developments in the physical sciences. The achievement of an estranged, critical perspective on one's home culture always has been one of the potential benefits of travel in foreign lands. In the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries, Europeans greatly expanded the extent and the kinds of contacts they had with the non-European world. Between the time of *Cyrano* and that of H. G. Wells, those contacts enveloped the world in a Europe-centered system of commerce and political power. Europeans mapped the non-European world, settled colonies in it, mined it and farmed it, bought and sold some of its inhabitants, and ruled over many others. In the process of all of this, they also developed a scientific discourse about culture and mankind. Its understanding of human evolution and the relation between culture and technology played a strong part in the works of Wells and his contemporaries that later came to be called science fiction.

Evolutionary theory and anthropology, both profoundly intertwined with colonial ideology and history, are especially important to early science fiction from the mid-nineteenth century on. They matter first of all as conceptual material. Ideas about the nature of humankind are central to any body of literature, but scientific accounts of humanity's origins and its possible or probable futures are especially basic to science fiction. Evolutionary theory and anthropology also serve as frameworks for the Social Darwinian ideologies that pervade early science fiction. The complex mixture of ideas about competition, adaptation, race, and destiny that was in part generated by evolutionary theory, and was in part an attempt to come to grips with—or to negate—its implications, forms a major part of the thematic material of early science fiction.¹ These will be recurrent topics of discussion in *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*.

The thesis that colonialism is a significant historical context for early science fiction is not an extravagant one. Indeed, its strong foundation in the obvious has been well recognized by scholars of science fiction. Most historians of science fiction agree that utopian and satirical representations of encounters between European travelers and non-Europeans—such as Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), *Cyrano's Comical History*, and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726)—form a major part of the genre's prehistory. Scholars largely (though not universally) agree that the period of the most fervid imperialist expansion in the late nineteenth century is also the

crucial period for the emergence of the genre (Suvin, *Victorian Science Fiction in the UK* 325–26; Clareson, *Some Kind of Paradise* 4; James, “Science Fiction by Gaslight” 34–35; for one who disagrees, see Delany, *Silent Interviews* 25–27). Science fiction comes into visibility first in those countries most heavily involved in imperialist projects—France and England—and then gains popularity in the United States, Germany, and Russia as those countries also enter into more and more serious imperial competition (Csicsery-Ronay 231). Most important, no informed reader can doubt that allusions to colonial history and situations are ubiquitous features of early science fiction motifs and plots. It is not a matter of asking whether but of determining precisely how and to what extent the stories engage colonialism. The work of interpreting the relation of colonialism and science fiction really gets under way, then, by attempting to decipher the fiction's often distorted and topsy-turvy references to colonialism. Only then can one properly ask how early science fiction lives and breathes in the atmosphere of colonial history and its discourses, how it reflects or contributes to ideological production of ideas about the shape of history, and how it might, in varying degrees, enact a struggle over humankind's ability to reshape it.

From Satirical Reversal to Anthropological Difference

We can start from Edward Said's argument in *Culture and Imperialism* that “the novel, as a cultural artefact of bourgeois society, and imperialism are unthinkable without each other” (70–71). His thesis is that the social space of the novel, which defines the possibilities allowed to its characters and the limits suffered by them, is involved inextricably with Western Europe's project of global expansion and control over non-European territories and cultures from the eighteenth century to the present. One could no more separate the psychological and domestic spaces represented in the novel from this emerging sense of a world knit together by Western political and economic control than one could isolate a private realm of emotions and interpersonal relationships from the history of class and property relations during the same period. Said does not argue that imperialism determines the form of the novel, but simply that it provides a structure of possibilities and a distribution of knowledge and power that the novel inevitably articulates.

Emergent English-language science fiction articulates the distribution of knowledge and power at a certain moment of colonialism's history. If

the Victorian vogue for adventure fiction in general seems to ride the rising tide of imperial expansion, particularly into Africa and the Pacific, the increasing popularity of journeys into outer space or under the ground in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries probably reflects the near exhaustion of the actual unexplored areas of the globe—the disappearance of the white spaces on the map, to invoke a famous anecdote of Conrad's. Having no place on Earth left for the radical exoticism of unexplored territory, the writers invent places elsewhere. But this compensatory reflex is only the beginning of the story. For colonialism is not merely an opening up of new possibilities, a “new world” becoming available to the “old” one, but also provides the impetus behind cognitive revolutions in the biological and human sciences that reshaped European notions of its own history and society. The exotic, once it had been scrutinized, analyzed, theorized, catalogued, and displayed, showed a tendency to turn back upon and re-evaluate those who had thus appropriated and appraised it. As the French philosopher Jacques Derrida put it, “Ethnology could have been born as a science only at the moment when a decentering had come about: at the moment when European culture . . . had been *dislocated*, driven from its locus, and forced to stop considering itself as the culture of reference” (282, Derrida's emphasis). Emergent science fiction also articulates the effects of this dislocation. The double-edged effect of the exotic—as a means of gratifying familiar appetites and as a challenge to one's sense of the proper or the natural—pervades early science fiction.

Although, as we will see further on, much early science fiction seems merely to transpose and revivify colonial ideologies, the invention of other worlds very often originates in a satirical impulse to turn things upside down and inside out. A satirical reversal of hierarchies generates the comparison of extraterrestrials to colonialists in an episode from Washington Irving's *A History of New York by Diedrich Knickerbocker* in 1809, for example. Irving invents a race from the Moon who arrive on the Earth “possessed of superior knowledge in the art of extermination,” on the basis of which, after “finding this planet to be nothing but a howling wilderness, inhabited by us poor savages and wild beasts,” they “take formal possession of it, in the name of his most gracious and philosophical excellency, the man in the moon” (252). Human savagery consists not only in having the wrong skin color (white, not pea-green) and anatomy (two eyes instead of one) but also in humans' perverse marriage customs and religious beliefs (monogamy and Christianity instead of communal promiscuity and ecstatic Lunacy). Irving's point is entirely explicit. When the savages ungratefully resist receiving the gifts of civilization, the lunarians convert

them to their own way of thinking “by main force” and “graciously permit [the savages] to exist in the torrid deserts of Arabia or the frozen regions of Lapland, there to enjoy the blessings of civilization and the charms of lunar philosophy, in much the same manner as the reformed and enlightened savages of this country are kindly suffered to inhabit the inhospitable forests of the north; or the impenetrable wildernesses of South America” (254).

In the course of the nineteenth century, Irving's strategy of satiric reversal persists in a number of important proto-science-fiction texts, such as Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), with its reversal of the values of disease and crime, and James De Mille's extraordinary lost-race novel, *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* (1888), with its systematic reversal of the values of light and darkness, wealth and poverty, and life and death. The most famous such reversal in the history of science fiction closely resembles Irving's. At the outset of H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898), Wells asks his English readers to compare the Martian invasion of Earth with the Europeans' genocidal invasion of the Tasmanians, thus demanding that the colonizers imagine themselves as the colonized, or the about-to-be-colonized. But in Wells this reversal of perspective entails something more, because the analogy rests on the logic prevalent in contemporary anthropology that the indigenous, primitive other's present is the colonizer's own past. Wells's Martians invading England are like Europeans in Tasmania not just because they are arrogant colonialists invading a technologically inferior civilization, but also because, with their hypertrophied brains and prosthetic machines, they are a version of the human race's own future.

The confrontation of humans and Martians is thus a kind of anachronism, an incongruous co-habitation of the same moment by people and artifacts from different times. But this anachronism is the mark of anthropological difference, that is, the way late-nineteenth-century anthropology conceptualized the play of identity and difference between the scientific observer and the anthropological subject—both human, but inhabiting different moments in the history of civilization. As George Stocking puts it in his intellectual history of Victorian anthropology, Victorian anthropologists, while expressing shock at the devastating effects of European contact on the Tasmanians, were able to adopt an apologetic tone about it because they understood the Tasmanians as “living representatives of the early Stone Age,” and thus their “extinction was simply a matter of . . . placing the Tasmanians back into the dead prehistoric world where they belonged” (282–83). The trope of the savage as a remnant of the past unites such authoritative and influential works as Lewis Henry Morgan's

Ancient Society (1877), where the kinship structures of contemporaneous American Indians and Polynesian islanders are read as evidence of “our” past, with Sigmund Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1913), where the sexual practices of “primitive” societies are interpreted as developmental stages leading to the mature sexuality of the West. Johannes Fabian has argued that the repression or denial of the real contemporaneity of so-called savage cultures with that of Western explorers, colonizers, and settlers is one of the pervasive, foundational assumptions of modern anthropology in general. The way colonialism made space into time gave the globe a geography not just of climates and cultures but of stages of human development that could confront and evaluate one another.²

The anachronistic structure of anthropological difference is one of the key features that links emergent science fiction to colonialism. The crucial point is the way it sets into motion a vacillation between fantastic desires and critical estrangement that corresponds to the double-edged effects of the exotic. Robert Stafford, in an excellent essay on “Scientific Exploration and Empire” in the *Oxford History of the British Empire*, writes that, by the last decades of the century, “absorption in overseas wilderness represented a form of time travel” for the British explorer and, more to the point, for the reading public who seized upon the primitive, abundant, unzoned spaces described in the narratives of exploration as a veritable “fiefdom, calling new worlds into being to redress the balance of the old” (313, 315). Thus when Verne, Wells, and others wrote of voyages underground, under the sea, and into the heavens for the readers of the age of imperialism, the otherworldliness of the colonies provided a new kind of legibility and significance to an ancient plot. Colonial commerce and imperial politics often turned the marvelous voyage into a fantasy of appropriation alluding to real objects and real effects that pervaded and transformed life in the homelands. At the same time, the strange destinations of such voyages now also referred to a centuries-old project of cognitive appropriation, a reading of the exotic other that made possible, and perhaps even necessary, a rereading of oneself. How does science fiction organize this play of the fantastic and the critical?

The Colonial Gaze

Although the reversal of perspective in Wells’s *War of the Worlds* transposes the positions of colonizer and colonized, the framework of colonial

relations itself remains intact in an important way. Wells switches the position of his white Western narrator from its accustomed, dominant, colonizing one to that of the dominated indigenous inhabitant of the colonized land. This strategy makes not only the political, but also the cognitive effects of the framework of colonial relations visible in a tellingly distorted way. The narrator no longer occupies the position usually accorded to the scientific observer, but instead finds himself in that role historically occupied by those who are looked at and theorized about rather than those who look, analyze, and theorize. We can call this cognitive framework establishing the different positions of the one who looks and the one who is looked at the structure of the “colonial gaze,” borrowing and adapting Laura Mulvey’s influential analysis of the cinematic gaze in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”³ The colonial gaze distributes knowledge and power to the subject who looks, while denying or minimizing access to power for its object, the one looked at. This structure—a cognitive disposition that both rests upon and helps to maintain and reproduce the political and economic arrangements that establish the subjects’ respective positions—remains strikingly present and effective in spite of the reversal of perspective in *The War of the Worlds*. Let me illustrate by way of comparison with another, pictorial representation of a colonial subject.

Consider the combination of exoticism, realism, science, and ideology in Alonzo Gartley’s 1903 photograph, *Native Hawaiian Fisherman with Throw Net* (fig. 1). Gartley’s photo orients itself towards its subject, the Hawaiian net fisherman, according to conventions that draw upon both anthropology and ethnography. The man’s clothing and the technology he is using draw attention to his cultural difference from an implicitly Western viewer who occupies the position of the photographic apparatus itself. The clothing and fishing tools identify the man as a primitive, and so, according to the dominant model of ethnographic and anthropological discourse at the time, establish his presence before the photo’s audience as a kind of anachronism that allows them to view their own cultural past. The fisherman becomes an object of knowledge, an exhibit for the contemplative gaze of the photographer and audience to work upon. The archaic figure of the Hawaiian fisherman is no mere curiosity, however, but rather is meant to call out to us across the gulf of the ages. As Morgan writes in his introduction to *Ancient Society*, “The history of the human race is one in source, one in experience, and one in progress” (xxx). The fisherman’s cultural difference is balanced by his universality. He represents man-the-hunter, confronting an elemental nature rendered power-

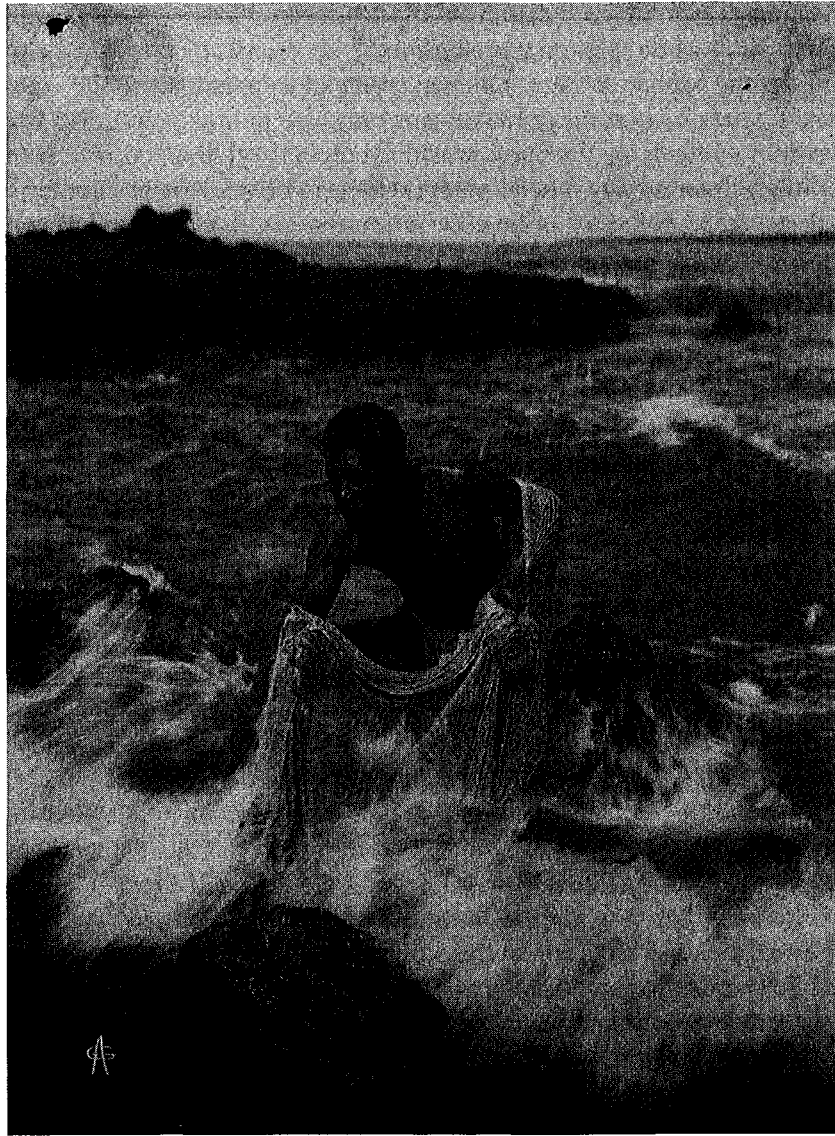


FIGURE 1. Alonzo Gartley, *Native Hawaiian Fisherman with Throw Net*. 1903.
 Courtesy of Bishop Museum.

fully present in the breaking surf and the bright sunlight. The image's archetypal quality implicates the audience in a commonality between the fisherman searching for his prey and the photographer capturing his image, and this commonality in turn exposes a second difference. For, if the scene articulates the photographer's technological superiority over his subject, it also lays bare the photographer's relative loss of immediacy in relation to the natural world. Capturing (or viewing) an image is a mediated, delayed gratification compared to netting a fish. Thus the universalizing frame both assigns the native an inferior position and gives that position critical, reflective power in relation to its superior.

The photo's combination of anachronism and universality conforms also to a dramatic proximity and yet emphatic separation from its subject that reproduces the convention of the invisible fourth wall of proscenium theater. We spectators are placed in the "realist" position of onlookers at a scene that is wholly absorbed in itself and therefore does not and cannot look back at us. This one-way quality, shared by dramatic, photographic, and later cinematic conventions, is likewise crucial to the ethnographic and anthropological conventions that treat such a figure as an anonymous, un-self-conscious representative of a type of society or a stage of human development. These assumptions might be disrupted, however, once one notices the photo's elaborately posed artificiality. For instance, one might suspect that the rough surf area and precarious rocks where the hunter crouches are chosen more for their picturesque qualities than for their appropriateness to the fisherman's task; nor would it be easy to explain what prey the fisherman can be stalking in this particular stance, since his keen eyes are directed at the shore, not the water. The self-consciousness of the pose therefore belies its apparent status as ethnographic evidence of a spontaneous practice. Although the photo may masquerade as a form of knowledge about the Hawaiian fisherman, then, it is evidently a piece of exoticism that, whatever Gartley's artistic or ethnographic intentions, was quickly put to service promoting a nascent tourist industry in the newly annexed American colony of Hawai'i.⁴

If noticing the artificiality of the model's pose begins to undermine the image's ethnographic significance, what would happen if we were to rearrange more actively the positions that establish the colonial gaze? If one were to introduce a reciprocal gaze into the scene, for instance, so that the model could be allowed to stand up straight, look back at the camera, and address himself to the audience, the generic conventions would switch from those of the ethnographic image to what Mary Louise Pratt calls auto-

ethnography. This reversal of narrative point of view would yield a story about the Hawaiian fisherman's experience that would, quite likely, have less to do with subsistence fishing than with trying to earn money by posing for a white photographer, and it would have correspondingly less to do with the social and economic organization of precontact Hawai'i than with its disruption by the economic and political dominance of the white settlers. But such an account also would be something rather different from the reversal of narrative perspective accomplished in *The War of the Worlds*. That generic turn would happen, not if Gartley's model were to take over the narration, but rather if the imaginary subject, the primitive man enveloped in nature, were to reconstruct from his point of view the scene of the impossibly alien, futuristic, and invasive photographer capturing his image. The resulting pictorial representation might look similar to the cover illustration of the August 1927 issue of *Amazing Stories*, which depicts Wells's Martian fighting machines astride their tripods attacking the English countryside with their heat rays, not wholly unlike so many giant photographers (fig. 2). (A more literal resemblance to the reversed photographic scenario appears on the cover of *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, June 1939. [See fig. 3.])

The Wellsian strategy is a reversal of positions that stays entirely within the framework of the colonial gaze and the anachronism of anthropological difference, but also highlights their critical potential. In *The War of the Worlds*, we should remember, the "native" human narrator himself occupies not only the position of the dominated, dehumanized colonial subject, but also that of the scientific observer, especially when he becomes an ethnographer in the marvelous chapter on the Martians' anatomy and technology. This ethnographic chapter is at least as crucial a register of the relation between colonial discourse and science fiction as the famous comparison regarding genocide at the novel's beginning. Thus the science fiction novel, while staying within the ideological and epistemological framework of the colonial discourse, exaggerates and exploits its internal divisions. Although it does not demystify the colonial gaze by bringing it into contact with history, as autoethnography would, nonetheless it estranges the colonial gaze by reversing the direction of the gaze's anachronism—science fiction pictures a possible future instead of the past—and setting the hierarchical difference between observer and observed swinging between the poles of subject and object, with each swing potentially questioning and recoding the discursive framework of scientific truth, moral certitude, and cultural hegemony.

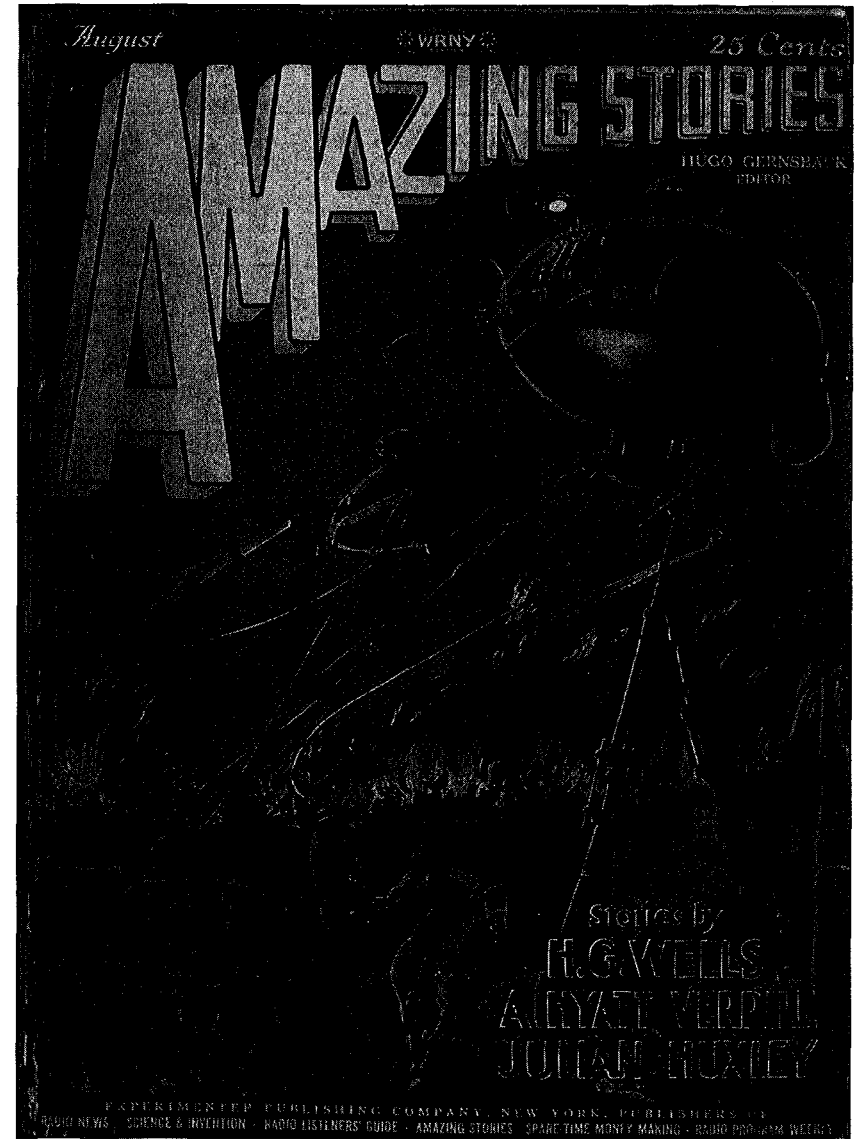


FIGURE 2. Frank R. Paul, front cover illustration, *Amazing Stories*, August 1927. Courtesy of Cushing Memorial Library and Archives, Texas A&M University. Used with permission of The Frank R. Paul Estate.

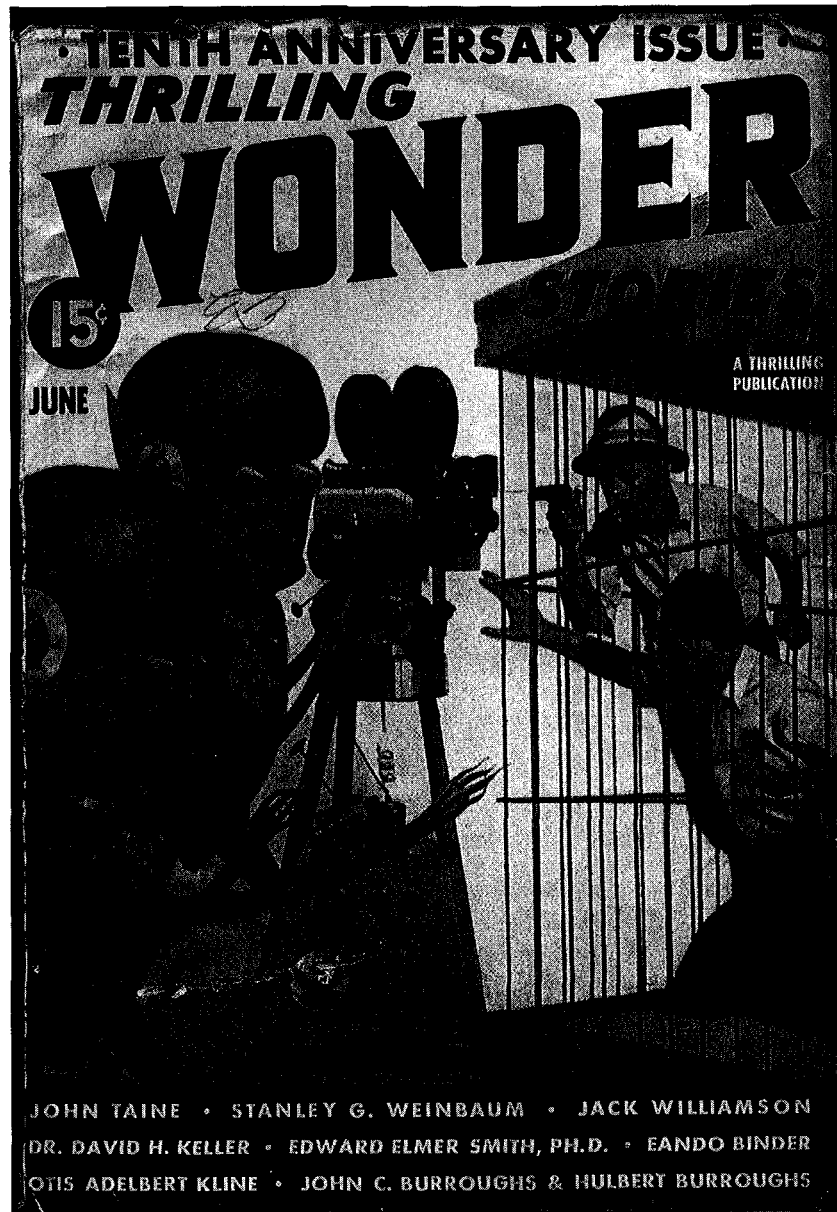


FIGURE 3. Harold V. Brown, front cover illustration, *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, June 1939. Courtesy of The Special Collections Library, University of California, Riverside.

"Looming through the Mists"

One of the later and less well-known novels of H. G. Wells, *Mr. Blettsworthy on Rampole Island* (1928), can help us to further elaborate and refine this analysis of the critical potential of science fiction. In part three of this novel, we find Wells at his most Swiftian, as he depicts the castaway Arnold Blettsworthy's stay among the savage, cannibalistic, and heretofore undiscovered Rampole Islanders. As in so many exotic adventure tales, like Arthur Conan Doyle's *Lost World* (1912) or RKO's *King Kong* (1933), Wells's isolated islanders share their island with dinosaurs. But Wells's dinosaurs are not spectacular predators. They are megatheria, sloths the size of elephants, who destroy all flowering plants, no longer even reproduce, but survive through sheer inertia. Blettsworthy explicitly compares the megatheria to legal and political institutions in his home society and uses these prehistoric survivors to illustrate that Darwinian "survival of the fittest" (a popularizing paraphrase coined by Herbert Spencer and endorsed by Darwin himself) by no means always favors the better species. Any discerning reader will see that the political and religious institutions of the Rampole Islanders also parody those of contemporary Europe, as in the "howling sessions" where the military leaders whip up hatred against their enemies. Blettsworthy himself survives among the islanders under the sponsorship of Chit, the interpreter of the Sacred Lunatic. Blettsworthy fills the post of Sacred Lunatic in an ideal fashion, since the things he says make no sense to the islanders and therefore are entirely amenable to Chit's construing them in ways that enhance his personal power. Chit's opportunistic manipulation of the cultural other is one keynote of the whole episode, and it casts its shadow on the third chapter of the section, "The Evil People," which stands back from Blettsworthy's personal narrative to perform an ethnographic survey of the Rampole Islanders' appalling cultural institutions.

In part four, it turns out, however, that this entire society is a delusion suffered by Blettsworthy, who actually is living in a mental asylum in Brooklyn. When he awakens to his actual reality and is convinced of his delusion, he responds with the key generic and theoretical principles behind the novel's construction: "'This is the real world and I admit it.' At that he [Dr. Minchett, i.e., Chit] looked relieved. 'And also,' I added, 'I perceive that it is Rampole Island, here and now! For, after all, what was Rampole Island, doctor? It was only the real world looming through the mists of my illusions'" (267–68). Thus Rampole Island's grotesqueries rep-

resent the realistic material in the other three parts of the novel—including Blettsworthy's betrayal by his first business partner and his fiancée; his grisly career in the trenches of World War I; his deliberate abandonment on a sinking ship by a brutal captain who previously has beaten a cabin boy to death; and his exploitation by Minchett, who discovered Blettsworthy on the real Rampole Island while Minchett was searching unsuccessfully for survivors of the megatheria, and has been using this serendipitous specimen to further his scientific career—all “looming through the mists” of Blettsworthy's illusions. It would be wrong to dismiss the strategy that Wells takes for placing the Rampole Island sojourn into the coherently realist satire as merely a version of the tired “it was only a dream” device. Instead, *Blettsworthy*, like Philip K. Dick's *Confessions of a Crap Artist* (1975), is a realist narrative that takes on fantasy and delusion as its subject matter in such a way as to produce a metafictional commentary on the author's better-known nonrealist work. Blettsworthy's delusional system, which functions realistically as a defense that shields him from the traumatic reality he has lived through (this is Minchett's explanation), simultaneously exposes and comments on the social delusions all his countrymen share.

In fact, isn't Blettsworthy's fantasy construction of the social order of Rampole Island closer to reality than the normal social understanding of the world itself in precisely the same way as a theory pierces through appearances to depict fundamental principles or structures of interaction? I think that the way fantasy and reality play against one another here is meant by Wells as a comment on the critical potential of the combination of realism and impossibility in fictions such as Part Three of *Blettsworthy*—which is to say in fictions like *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) or *The Time Machine* (1895).⁵ But there is a temptation to be avoided here, which is that of reducing the Rampole Island episode to the hidden truth of the rest of the narrative. Such a reading would content itself with the moralizing conclusion that civilization is the true savagery, an anticlimax we can avoid by resisting the equation of the “real world looming through the mists” of Blettsworthy's illusions with truth unmasking falsehood. For what we are presented with is a metafictional structure, a fiction commenting upon another fiction. “Looming through the mist” is not a way of exiting from the narrative's frame to find a truth outside of it, but instead a way for the narrative to double back and comment upon itself. Moreover, what makes it possible for the fantastic adventure fiction of Rampole Island to be written over and against the realist fiction that contains it is the displaced cultural reference provided by the island and its people. It resembles a science-fictional displacement as soon as the island is exposed

as a fantasy of the West, but its critical potential depends on the island's not being simply a disavowed, elaborately disguised self-portrait. Instead, Wells's metafiction sets into play about the image of the exotic other a set of tensions alternately assigning to the other the status of discovery or projection, datum or fantasy, the epiphany of radical difference or the disguised representation of the same.

This play of antithetical possibilities is an important measure of science fiction's engagement with colonial history, ideology, and discourse. But these ideological and discursive effects are not so much a matter of topical references as they are results of the way the narratives of colonial history and ideology “loom through the mists” of science fiction. It is as if science fiction itself were a kind of palimpsest, bearing the persistent traces of a stubbornly visible colonial scenario beneath its fantastic script. Or, to change the metaphor, it is as if science fiction were polarized by the energies of the colonial field of discourse, like a piece of iron magnetized by its proximity to a powerful electrical field. Both of these metaphors are ways of saying that science fiction exposes something that colonialism imposes. However, to repeat a point, colonialism is not simply the reality that science fiction mystifies. I am not trying to argue that colonialism is science fiction's hidden truth. I want to show that it is part of the genre's texture, a persistent, important component of its displaced references to history, its engagement in ideological production, and its construction of the possible and the imaginable.

Genre, System, and Text: Defining the Object of Study

Before venturing further into analysis of the relation between colonialism and the emergence of science fiction, however, it is necessary to explain exactly what I mean by “science fiction” and its “emergence.” By “the emergence of science fiction,” I mean the coalescence of a set of generic expectations into a recognizable condition of production and reception that enables both writers and readers to approach individual works as examples of a literary kind that in the 1920s and after came to be named science fiction. This process involves a historical shift in the system of recognizable literary genres, the emergence of a set of conventions and expectations that presented itself as a market niche, on the one hand (as the publishing entrepreneur Hugo Gernsback, the man most responsible for promulgating the term “science fiction,” recognized), and as a creative possibility, on the other (as Verne, Wells, Conan Doyle, London, Burroughs, and many oth-