SCIENCE FICTION LITERATURE AND ITS ROLE IN SOCIETY, RESEARCH, AND ACADEMIA

INTERVIEW WITH FRANCESCO VERSO

LITERATURA DE FICÇÃO CIENTÍFICA E SEU PAPEL NA SOCIEDADE, PESQUISA E ACADEMIA

Entrevista com prof. Francesco Verso

LA LITERATURA DE FICCIÓN CIENTÍFICA Y SU PAPEL EN LA SOCIEDAD, LA INVESTIGACIÓN Y LA ACADEMIA

Entrevista con el prof. Francesco Verso

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Francesco Verso is a multiple-award Science Fiction writer and editor. He has published: Antidoti umani, e-Doll, Nexhuman, Bloodbusters and I camminatori (made of The Pulldogs and No/Mad/Land). Nexhuman and Bloodbusters – translated in English by Sally McCorry – have been published in the US by Apex Books, in the UK by Luna press and in China for Bofeng. He also works as editor and publisher of Future Fiction, a multicultural project, dedicated to scouting and publishing the best World SF in translation from more than 25 countries and 11 languages with authors like Ian McDonald, Han Song, Ken Liu, Liu Cixin, Vandana Singh, Chen Qiufan, Xia Jia and others. From 2019 he's the Honorary Director of the Fishing Fortress SF Academy of Chongqing and a literary agent for Future Wave, an agency specialized in import/export of copyright from/to China. He lives in Roma (Italy) and may be found at www.futurefiction.org.

Thank you very much for accepting this interview on such an important topic as the role of science fiction in our era. As you know, my research is on the effects of digital technologies, and I think science fiction is a valuable source to explore the implementations of new digital technologies in our society (Bonfiglioli and Liberati 2021; Liberati 2022; Mykhailov and Liberati 2022).

Thanks to the conference *LINE2021 (Living in the New Era (时代・新生))* organized at *Shanghai Jiao Tong University*,[1] we attended the presentations by many researchers working on science fiction and

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[1] *LINE2021 - Living in the New Era (时代・新生): Technologies, Creativity, and Science fiction* https://shss.sjtu.edu.cn/En/List/345

new digital technologies in China and Italy. You were one of the two novelists invited as keynote speakers. As you know, the other science fiction novelist invited as keynote speaker was Prof. Wu Yan because of his tight connection binding science fiction to society and academia. Both of your presentations tackled the interactions we can have among science fiction, academia, and society in an exciting way. He focused on China since his main activities and production are located in China. Your perspective was a bit different from your experiences in Italy and China. Your presentation showed how science fiction should be part of education to make people think critically. It should be considered in society because it helps society face the societal challenges related to implementing novel technologies.

In line with the theme of your presentation, I would like to ask you three main questions covering the role of science fiction in our world at different levels. These three questions have also been asked to Prof. Wu Yan, and they cover the relations science fiction has with our society in general, the research on the social impact of technologies, and the research and education within academia. There will also be other questions stemming from our discussion, but the main topics will be related to these three main elements.

1. *Nicola Liberati: How do you think science fiction contributed and is still contributing to the development of China?*

Francesco Verso: Science fiction has its value. In general, writers can create coherent world buildings by providing possible futures and hypotheses with different levels of plausibility. So, they can also forecast the applications and effects of technologies. In a way, science fiction writers tackle innovation by merging dramaturgy and developing new technologies.

This narrative can stimulate speculation concerning technological contexts grounded on the development of our society. It is not just an allegory. I think authors can create multiple hypothetic scenarios that produce a cloud of possibilities to provide suggestions on how to implement new technologies. In my work, I try to dialogue between science fiction writers and researchers on specific topics such as climate change in relation to the "Anthropocene" (Verso and Paura 2018) to give an idea of the future built upon different angles of the same phenomenon.

Then, to answer your question in a straightforward way: yes. I think science fiction is a valuable (practical?) way to tackle the technological development in society.

2. *Nicola Liberati: How can we use imagination to merge different disciplines and have a perspective toward the future?*

Francesco Verso: Especially in China, I have been frequently asked to show how to use imagination. I noticed people working in China think of themselves as oriented towards "following" more than developing "creativity." So, they ask me, an "Italian," to give them suggestions on how to be creative while writing a text.

I think imagination is based on two main pillars. The first element relies on the ability to question the reality we live in because by questioning the world, we understand it better. It can be just a general question in the form of "What if …?". For example, we all know how gravity works, but letus assume gravity works differently. What does it happen then? How will our society live and work according to this new element?

The second pillar is the freedom to generate different ideas. If I cannot express my hypotheses and I cannot test them in reality, I cannot make them part of the actual context.

I think imagination and this way of questioning our reality are essential for society because, side by side with the development of new technologies, we need the development of ethics and moral values. Without such a development, we will have problems understanding how to use the technologies, and we risk becoming our tools' tools.

3. *Nicola Liberati: Do you think science fiction can be used to explore the potentialities and the effects of new technologies?*

Francesco Verso: The contrast between sciences providing knowledge about real things and science fiction providing imaginaries about possible things which do not exist yet is essential.

If sciences do not pose hypotheses, they are just the description of nature. If sciences do not ask questions, they are just dogmatic. At the same time, if literature does not consider the results in sciences by making them part of the narration, it becomes obsolete.

Sciences experiment in a controlled environment while science fiction experiments in an uncontrolled one. Science fiction generates ideas and memes, and it stimulates reflections on the applications of the technologies by being connected to emotions.

Thus, the two disciplines must talk to each other. This contrast and dialogue are the sources for new ideas and the ground to generate something new.

This is why I coined the new term "future fiction" to show how the future is not just about sciences but our culture in general. The future comes not only with the modification of an engine and the design of a new device related to sciences, but it comes with music, cooking, dance, and so on.

Science fiction is about giving people a future and seeing what they do with it. As Frederik Pohl said, science fiction does not focus on the flying car but on the traffic jams it generates.[2]

For this reason, I think a person who reads science fiction is developing antibodies towards the future and the effects of technologies.

4. *Nicola Liberati: Thank you for this perspective on how science fiction can work to include different scenarios. I feel that science fiction can be read as a way to study and explore the future, but I also see many people enjoying the novel without developing a critical perspective on what is happening in our present. Is it possible to show how to blur the boundaries between the "fiction" in science fiction and what is happening in our society to develop people's critical thinking better? What elements in science fiction nudge the readers to "open their eyes" to the future and develop the "antibody" to tackle the societal challenges we all face?*

Francesco Verso: I fear this problem is not just within science fiction, but it relates to arts in general. When a person looks at art thinking that the work of art is something disconnected from the world the person is living in, we have the same situation.

We need two main elements in order to avoid this situation. The first element is the freedom of the reader. The reader must feel free to act after receiving the stimulation to think critically.

When I started reading science fiction, I was doing it as a hobby, so I had two jobs simultaneously: a "primary" job and one related to science fiction. I decided to become a science fiction writer only when I had a problem with my "primary" job, which forced me to decide what I wanted to do in my future. Because of this situation and the fact I had some time to think and organize myself, I finally decided to change my life and make science fiction my "primary" and only job.

The other element is the ability to be engaged and feel responsible for what happens around the reader. So, education is important because people should feel empowered and able to contribute to society in some way. Even if the readers do not know what they can precisely achieve, they must feel the urgency

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[2] "A good science fiction story should be able to predict not the automobile but the traffic jam" by Frederik Pohl

to do something in the world. The novel serves as the fire starter to trigger a person to start a process of change in society.

So, I think it is a much more complex topic that touches arts in general and even politics.

5. *Nicola Liberati: Yes, I understand. Especially, I can see the relation to the call for action and critical thinking embedded in science fiction and the fact this element can be present in many other fields.*

Francesco Verso: Yes, and I would like to open a parenthesis because there are two different souls within science fiction: science fiction for evasion and one more speculative.

When the author creates a world lost in a distant time and maybe in a different dimension, where there are fictional creatures with few connections with the world where the readers live, the plausibility of these settings is so low then it is easy to let the readers think that it is completely disconnected from their actual context. It is more about evasion than speculation of the possible futures the humanity might have.

However, the other kind of science fiction is designed to tightly link with the present world and the problems the readers face. For example, science fiction novels like 1984 are not for mere evasion. In these novels, it is pretty hard not to relate what is described in the book to the reality where the reader is living. The novel becomes a description of the actual world more than fiction. For example, Orwell wanted to make a political statement by publishing that book which can also be seen in the title of the book since it is "1984," which is related to the year "1948" when it was written.

6. *Nicola Liberati: I like this idea of the distance between two worlds to make the connection possible. How important is the concept of "distance" for developing critical thinking in science fiction?*

Francesco Verso: If it is an experience related to someone in particular on specific conditions not associated with the reader, the reader might not be interested in it.

However, the reader can easily engage if something different touches people's lives. For example, if the author talks about the changes in the solar exposition on earth and the possible consequences it might have on life on earth, the novel becomes part of the potential future the readers can connect with, and so, the reader can develop critical thinking through the use of science fiction.

People can normalize the future by making it visible and within their reach, thanks to science fiction. So, thanks to science fiction, people can get used to thinking of something which might happen soon. For this reason, it is understandable why so many companies and other actors have interests in science fiction too.

John Kessel said that science fiction does not talk about the year, place, and society where the novel is located, but it talks about the year, place, and society where the story is written. In a way, I agree with him that science fiction shows the relation to the actual society the novel has.

By describing a scenario, the author tries to express a future that may not be fully expressed in language. However, thanks to the art of translation between what the future the author thinks will be and the way the author describes it, the reader gets closer to these possible future scenarios. Thus, the authors need to find a way to express it to make the reader feel something, and, at the same time, the author has to make the reader think through the novel. I believe this is the clear distinction between a great science fiction novel and a simple story.

7. *Nicola Liberati: Thank you very much. I think this leads naturally to the third question, which is also the most crucial one from my perspective regarding developing critical thinking in the next generation through education. This question is essential and*

complicated at the same time since it binds together different elements. It is not just about the "role" of science fiction in general in society, but it is also related to the strategies needed to make science fiction embedded in academia. Thus, it touches many different fields like research, marketing, attractiveness for companies and students, and so on. Since you work in one of the research centers in China directly related to science fiction – the Fishing Fortress Science Fiction Academy of Chongqing run by Zhang Fan – how can we embed science fiction within the University as a field of research?

Francesco Verso: The resistance to integrating science fiction in different areas we find is dictated by ignorance. There are places where there is no opposition or resistance to introducing science fiction or at least where there is a kind of neutrality to it.

For example, in Shenzhen China, Prof. Wu Yan created a center for developing human creativity - called "Science and Human Imagination Research Center" at the *Southern University of Science and Technology* of Shenzhen[3] - binding together sciences, science fiction, and students. In Chongqing (China), the *Fishing Fortress SF Academy* already has departments with different applications relating to various fields in industry and academia like cinema.

Out of China, in Olso (Norway), the center *CoFutures,* where I am a board member, studies future scenarios. Thanks to a grant, a group of researchers can publish and research the relations connecting future, technology, and sciences. For example, related to this project, I just edited a volume titled *Meteotopia: Futures of Climate (In)Justice* (Chattopadhyay, Rüsche, and Verso 2022). In this volume, we invited science fiction authors from the global south, and we asked them what the consequences of climate change on their countries are. Moreover, we also asked to think of future scenarios because the cases of a hurricane/typhoon hitting Tokyo and Rio de Janeiro are not the same since Tokyo is famous for its resiliency.

The problem is tackled differently according to the background and location where the event occurs. Thus, we need to consider different perspectives and let other people from diverse backgrounds participate in our discussions.

The project "Co-futures" considers this point by including different backgrounds in the narrative to produce an idea of the future, which is closer to what the future might be. For example, when we think of space colonization, the European idea of what it might be is not enough because other countries like China have very ambitious space programs that shape the future we will experience. Thus, we need to consider this narrative if we want to think of what kind of future we might have in the following years.

Taking into account different backgrounds and cultures is essential also because the idea of the future, in general, is related to people's cultural backgrounds. In some cultures, the past is behind the people, and the future is in front of them, such as in some populations in the Andes. From their perspective, they bring their children on their shoulders, so their future is on their back, while they look ahead to see what they did and to look at their past. Thus, by introducing different perspectives, we can also think differently about what "future" means for us in general.

I think science fiction has a sort of "surprise" in itself, which is used to look at the future and include different scenarios. It should provide a perspective on what our world will look like without excluding possibilities.

Arizona State University also has a program related to speculation about the future where science fiction authors serve as consultants. These authors participate in the discussion in the program and provide contributions that become books such as *Future Tense Fiction – Stories of Tomorrow* (Berg et al. 2019).

Thus, I think science fiction is necessary, and many people understand its value. I believe that those who see that we ended the century of "speed" and entered the century of "acceleration" know that science

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[3] See the website https://rw.sustech.edu.cn/a/En/E&R/Scientific_research_work/2019/0513/293.html

fiction is the tool to analyze the application of technologies in the future. The people not understanding this passage and the change which comes with it will continue to do things in the old way, and the acceleration will dissolve them. Acceleration can be hard to understand because it grows exponentially, but it is accurate. It is what I can see in China, such as the disorientation and dissociation generated by new technologies introduced in society at an exponential level.

The phenomenon of science fiction changed over time. Seven years ago, it did not have the credential and background to impose itself. Now, it has the chance to say something about our society also in research and development because it is taken into account seriously by society and companies. I have been asked to talk about specific topics, and this opportunity was not possible before. The idea of having a science fiction author is now perceived as valuable, while seven years ago was impossible.

As Ballard used to say, science fiction is the engine for transformation, and it is the narration of the present, so we need it to tackle the societal challenges we will face.[4]

For example, science fiction explores new territories and asks questions like: What are the latest technologies about? How are the new algorithms going to work? Who is going to produce the new technologies?

We are explorers, and so it is natural that we are few.

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[4] In order to access the citation by Ballard see the following webpage https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/sep/11/jg-ballard-science-fiction-celebrates-possibilities-life-1970