

Shock, Wonder and Estrangement: A Mood-based Approach to Science Fiction

If literature is something like a cognitive environment; that is, something that affords and constrains certain actions and articulations, it seems to me that it follows that this cognitive environment would have *atmospheres*. Atmospheres, of course, have gained increased critical interest in recent years, most noticeably perhaps in Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's monograph *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*, but also cognitivists like Peter Stockwell has discussed the use of atmosphere in literary studies. I am interested in getting a sense of what atmospheres would bring to genre studies and genre analyses.

SF and Genre Theory

Genre has always been a part of literary theory, though the issue has never truly been resolved. Every critical formation seems determined to find its own understanding of genre, whether we want to discuss the overarching genre categories of novel, drama, poetry, and so forth, the classical understanding of tragedy, comedy, and possibly history, or the more popular understanding of genre as commercial categories like horror, mystery, and what I am interested in here — science fiction (sf).

Early sf genre theory, to the extent that it truly existed, was surprisingly interested in the *affect* of reading sf. The guiding concept for the study of sf was “a sense of wonder.”¹

In search of a more critically acceptable concept at the time, the groundbreaking moment was Darko Suvin's definition of sf as “the literature of cognitive estrangement.”² As I have discussed elsewhere, the fusing of cognitive (not really in the contemporary sense) and estrangement during a structuralist moment when alienating literature was seen as a badge of honor, this definition provides the study of sf with the academic capital it needed to be taken seriously.³ For the next thirty years, there was no alternative to this definition, only restating it to suit particular needs.

¹ Scholes, *Structural Fabulation?*

² Darko Suvin

³ Steen Christiansen, *The Dissemination of Science Fiction*.

Estrangement was seen as produced by one or more *novum*, aspects of the sf world that differ from our world. These novums would be cognitively explainable, as opposed to fantasy's magic, and so the sf storyworld function through *extrapolation*, something known that is extended within a rational, explicable framework. A few examples of the literary effect of such novum.

the door dilated

he turned on his left side

the red sun was low, the blue high

*her world exploded*⁴

All these examples hinge on the ambiguous tension between metaphor and literalness, the fact that a novum makes these sentences literal and produce *vraisemblance* according to the storyworld. Although Suvin himself never uses such terms, we can easily recognize the logic as similar to cognitive schema. Peter Stockwell has shown how sf produces blended spaces, where cinema completion allows us to adjust to more complex situations, such as this opening sentence from *Neuromancer*:⁵

*The sky above the port was the color of television tuned to a dead channel.*⁶

This opening sentence produces a distinctive mood that conflates the natural with the technological in a metaphor, but this metaphor *remains* a metaphor, just as the port is in fact a seaport not a spaceport. What Walter Kintsch has dubbed “knowledge nets” also helps organize (and to some extent ironically mislead) our understanding of *Neuromancer*.⁷

⁴ Delany's examples from *Starboard Wine*?

⁵ Peter Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* (Routledge 2002), 101.

⁶ William Gibson, *Neuromancer*

⁷ Walter Kintsch

Seitel's concept of generic world helps us connect Stockwell's blended spaces to the schema and mechanisms of individual sentences,⁸ and also help us connect to Terence Cave's notion of literature as a cognitive environment with a host of affordances.⁹

For historical reasons, as we have seen, sf criticism has emphasized cognitive aspects as a way of distinguishing itself from the "irrational" mode of fantasy. Unfortunately, this has led to a lack of focus on the embodied aspects of sf: how are bodies impacted by the reading experience and how is this embodied experience precipitated through textual features?

Consider this opening from Charles Stross' *Iron Sunrise*:

*Just outside the expanding light cone of the present a star died, iron-bombed.*¹⁰

This sentence from Charles Stross' *Iron Sunrise* is literal, scientific jargon turned into metaphor. While accurate, I do not believe this sentence should be read for its scientific merit but for its aesthetic impact. For sf, then, scientific jargon (whether accurate or not) is used for aesthetic purposes, rather than scientific purposes. This is not saying very much, but it allows us to move away from notions of accuracy, prediction, and extrapolation as necessary features of sf.

In other words, the estrangement found in sf is suddenly no longer necessarily cognitive but also fully embodied. I will argue that the generic world and cognitive environment of sf include affects, emotions, and atmospheres, the latter of which is what I am primarily interested in here.

Mood, Atmosphere, and SF

By emphasizing moods, I am drawing on what N. Katherine Hayles has termed "unthought" and Steven Shaviro "discognition": processes unavailable to consciousness yet

⁸ Peter Seitel, "Theorising Genres - Interpreting Works," *New Literary History*, 34:2, 275- 97. 279.

⁹ Terrence Cave, *Thinking With Literature*, 46ff

¹⁰ Charles Stross, *Iron Sunrise* (Ace Books), 12.

necessary for it to function.¹¹ Both critics significantly employ sf as a way of thinking this unthought. Neither critic, unfortunately, engages with the development of mood-based studies, such as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's desire for "discovering sources of energy" in literary works.¹² Peter Stockwell somewhat similarly develops a notion of textual energy in his article "Atmosphere and Tone," where he understands atmosphere as "the perceived quality of the literary world from a readerly perspective".¹³

Mood or atmosphere: the terms seem to pay attention to a mostly neglected aspect of a conventional phenomenological and gestalt pair: foreground and background or figure and ground. Ground has conventionally been understood as that which makes the figure stand out, that which we are really interested in as literary scholars. The current interest in mood, atmosphere, *Stimmung*, ambience seems to reflect an increased interest in the ground, whether it is to better understand the reader's experience (Stockwell) or to also connect the work to the cultural climate it exists in (Gumbrecht).

What are the repercussions for genre theory, in particular in the case of sf? Most sf critics have been interested in the figure of sf — Suvin's estrangement is a figure that emerges from the novum. Stockwell's emphasis on neologisms and visible versus invisible poetics planes similarly favors difference and deviation; that is to say, figure.¹⁴ Figure, of course, is what is immediately recognizable, that which is evidently different from other modes of literature, and relatively feasible to produce an archive around. We are looking for literary effects, a practice that has a long tradition in literary studies.

¹¹ N. Katherine Hayles, *Unthought* and Steven Shaviro, *Discognition*.

¹² Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*.
(), 18.

¹³ Peter Stockwell, "Atmosphere and Tone," *Cambridge Handbook of Stylistics*. Tone is the authorial voice, conversely.

¹⁴ Peter Stockwell, *The Poetics of Science Fiction* (Longman 2000), 115ff; 169ff.

Yet the ground is what makes the figure stand out. We can rephrase this slightly and understand the ground as that which directs or guides embodied feeling within a given environment — in this case the literary archive of sf.¹⁵ In other words, while the figures of sf may well be estranging, the grounds serve a different purpose — to achieve the literary world through its aesthetic composition.¹⁶ Stockwell accounts for sf’s worlds through recourse to informativity and a search for motivation.¹⁷ While these arguments go some length toward explaining the realization of sf worlds, they also reduce the notion of ground to issues of cognitive mechanisms with no room for embodied feelings as ways of guiding (or priming) these same mechanisms.

By turning to mood and atmosphere as ways of understanding and analyzing how sf worlds are realized, I am interested in the way that readers realize worlds on the basis of the ground or what Robert Sinnerbrink calls the “qualitative characteristics” of a world.¹⁸ The interest comes from a desire to shift away from piecemeal, sequential cognitive cues and into a far more environmentally-oriented notion of how aesthetic worlds are produced and received.

Shock and Injection

I have no interest in reproducing Suvin’s unilateral understanding of sf as purely based on one aspect. I do, however, want to pay particular attention to one aspect of sf that has gained a degree of prominence lately: shock. I take shock from two main sources; one is Walter Benjamin’s notion of modernity as consisting of shock rhythms, and the other is Gilles

¹⁵ I’m drawing here on Dirk Eitzen, “Effects of Entertaining Violence: A Critical Overview of the General Aggression Model.” In Nannicelli, Ted, and Paul Taberham. *Cognitive Media Theory*, Routledge, 2014.

¹⁶ I’m drawing here on Sinnerbrink, Robert. “Stimmung: Exploring the Aesthetics of Mood.” *Screen* 53, no. 2 (2012): 148–63. doi:10.1093/screen/hjs007.

¹⁷ Stockwell, 164.

¹⁸ Sinnerbrink, “*Stimmung*,” 163.

Deleuze's desire for philosophy to be a "shock to thought," which I will hijack for aesthetic concerns here, particularly the way sf may allow us to see the world, our world, anew.

In Warren Ellis' *Injection*, an ongoing comic book series, presents such a shock to thought in the way the story-world suggests a confluence of past, mystical understanding and future, scientific understanding of the world are in fact rooted in the same basis. On the one hand, this confluence is what functions as the work's *novum* and therefore what produces a degree of cognitive estrangement in the reader. Visually, there are several moments in the first collection that accurately suggests such cognitive estrangement and also produces moments of wonder and even shock. There is our world, and there is an "other world" accessible both by mystical means (as in magic) but also through computers, wifi, and the internet (the comic is a little ambiguous on this precise point).

So far, so conventional. Such moments are exactly the ones we expect from sf's genre schemata and function as the figure to a rather recognizable ground of more-or-less 21st century with a few advanced technologies thrown in as is usual for today's techno-thrillers. These moments, then, are part of the world's "qualitative characteristics" and "quality of the literary world." These moments are what stick out and make the work unique, and surely also what we would retain as readers on our first reading. In this respect, these scenes and moments follow what Sinnerbrink refers to as *episodic moods* but I feel more comfortable referring to as affects.¹⁹ These are moments of intensity in the work and often speak more to the narrative than the story-world itself. While I do not wish to separate story and world, distinguishing between affective moments and broader moods is helpful.

There are a number of other moments that far more subtly provide an atmospheric ground of the world of *Injection*. Several panels produce a visual parallel between mythic and technological dimensions of the story-world, panels where this is not pushed to the foreground but serves as a form of anchoring mood.²⁰ On page 13 of the first *Injection*

¹⁹ Sinnerbrink, "*Stimmung*," 162.

²⁰ I'm extending Sinnerbrink's notion of episodic and transitional moods here;

collection, Robin Morel surveys the English landscape, contemplating its old energies, such as the Uffington White Horse, while captions anchor the thematic issues of deep time. Only six pages later, a similar page layout (*mise-en-page*) suggests a different kind of temporal theme. The top panel that also frames the three other panels is almost identical to the earlier panel, except that instead of the Uffington White Horse, a covered, white radar installation, reminiscent of those believed to be part of the Echelon system. This page works almost like a response to the former page, except here the temporal frame is suggestive of future technologies, the FPI (Finest Production Industries), and the government agency at work. In this far more subtle way, the same confluence of deep time and future projection are paralleled, but forms the ground from which a broader storyworld atmosphere emanates.

I want to make two points here about the distinction and shift between figure and ground, *novum* and atmosphere. The confluence of past and future, myth and technology becomes a guiding structure for all of *Injection*'s run for 15 issues so far (and ongoing, as far as we know). Each of the three main narrative arcs have their own *novum* that blends myth and technology. However, without any criticism of Ellis' stories, by the second arc we expect this blend and while they are still *novums*, they are far less estranging, *because of their generic repetition*. The genre schemata of sf works to reduce estrangement, which would suggest that the more familiar with sf we become, the less science fictional each sf work becomes. This is maybe even more pronounced in serial works, where the basic premise is repeated over and over, rather than singular works.

In any case, what we find here in sf is a kind of *desensitization*, if we restrict our understanding of desensitization strictly to a learning process, where "at the cognitive level, the mind actively tunes out constants in the environment, like a background noise or a smell. We become inured to it."²¹ In a genre context, we would argue that constant estranging effect slowly become tuned out as parts of the genre world. No longer will the estranging *novums*

Sinnerbrink 162.

²¹ Eitzen, 170.

functionally be estranging, because readers become inured to their estranging effects. Note that I am not ruling out estrangement in *sf tout court* but simply arguing that repeated *novums* that have similar structures — such as the blending of myth and technology — reduce their estranging effect over time. Again, this is most likely most pronounced in serial works.

We can refer to this form of desensitization as *habituation* or *naturalization* to align with Formalist work. The cognitivist angle simply solidifies that naturalization is a cognitive mechanism that helps process information and reduce noise. What this also shows us is that figure can slowly change into ground, that what starts out as a distinctive feature may become part of a work's atmosphere, something that no longer produces a reaction in the reader strong enough to be considered an affect but still present as a background feeling.

To specify a bit more what such atmospheres do, I suggest that we understand them as part of a larger mechanism of priming, understood as “the basic function of the nervous system, which is to guide the body's interactions with the environment. The brain does not just register and interpret stimuli from the environment; it prepares the body and mind for potential action.”²² Once again, I equate the environment as both the individual work and the larger archive genre world. Both the genre schema and the work's specific devices work together to produce a larger environment — the ground — from which specific affects arise — the figure. As I have also argued, there is a constant oscillation between figure and ground.

Returning to *Injection* there are two effects that warrant further discussion in relation figure/ground and the production of atmosphere within the genre archive: the first arc's parallel narration and the moment of peripeteia when the true source of the captions is revealed. The narrative structure in the first arc, also the first trade paperback, moves between present time and past events in flashback. The flashbacks are clearly marked visually by having faded colors and serve to provide background information about each of the characters and the entire premise of the world. The present storyline is the primary one, with

²² Eitzen, 162.

extra story information provided through the captions, that serve mostly as access to character thoughts and motivations.

This parallel narration serves to produce both curiosity and suspense at the same time, while withholding the fact that the ominous enemy referred to only as “the Injection” is in fact a virus (for lack of a better word) that has been summoned (for lack of a better word) and unleashed into the world, to “let new potential futures leak through,” as Robin puts it.²³ This reversal is a moment of *peripeteia* and as such a narrative figure. However, this narrative figure only emerges as a result of the narrative ground: the parallel narration. The withholding (or retardation) of story information is precisely what allows for the reversal to manifest as shock. Had the plot been chronological there would have been no shock. The parallel narration therefore produces a specific atmosphere of obscured knowledge, that we can tell the characters have access to but we do not — certainly an example of “the perceived quality of the literary world from a readerly perspective.” To be clear: the *sf novum* of myth and technology blending, that reality runs on code — something like digital computer code — is estranging but only allows its full emergence because of the work’s atmosphere.

This brings us to the second example of atmosphere, which comes from the captions that I have previously pointed out provide access to character thoughts. In other words, these captions are immediately recognizable as the non-diegetic comments of an omniscient narrator. Only at the end of the first trade paperback, essentially parallel with the revelation that the Injection is made by the main protagonists, do we realize that the captions are actually the diegetic comments of the Injection, speaking directly to Maria. In her damaged state she has simply never acknowledged this fact to us (and possibly herself). This revelation is another moment of *peripeteia*, in some ways as shocking as the self-inflicted creation of the Injection. And once again, the moment comes from a subtle use of conventional narrative form suddenly taking on a different intensity. Again, only against the ground of the comic’s narrative structure does this revelation truly work as a figure.

²³ Ellis, *Injection*, 97.

As we can see, we can still understand *Injection* within a genre context and archive of sf and the Suvinian notions of *novum* and estrangement are not rendered useless. However, they do take on a different function, where we recognize them as being distinct figures that are contingent on a broader ground, which helps produce the environment within which the estranging moments take place. Rather than invalidate Suvin's finds, my supplement of atmosphere provide a way of understanding how estrangement works in sf, both by way of becoming naturalized but also by emerging from a distinct atmosphere produced by the work itself, rather than a more vague horizon of expectations from the reader's perspective.

Also, the focus on atmosphere allows for a better sense of the role of the storyworld and not just the narrative structure and effects of narration; only through the ground of the world itself does the narrative figures emerge. We get a better sense of how the intense moments of the figures are embodied in relation to the work's more general atmosphere. We are primed for certain moments and events within the storyworld, often being unaware of such priming. Literary works are saturated with feelings and sensory experiences which is what produces a given atmosphere.

Towards an Atmospheric Understanding of Genre

A genre, any genre, is an archive of atmospheres that taken together produce a distinctive cognitive environment, a particular way of thinking with literature (but happily across media). Just as the weather changes, so does this cognitive environment change, while simultaneously holding the potential for all forms at any moment. Unseasonable weather, surprise floods, changing fronts — all of these become metaphors to understand and describe works, cycles, movements, reactions with and against other works and cycles, and new formations. Analogies only go so far, but ecological considerations provide a more flexible way of dealing with literary archives.