

## Reading Rieder by Lamplight

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**Rieder, John. *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2017. 224 pages. ISBN 9780819577160. Pbk. \$22.95.**

Trying to put into words what science fiction is has been at the center of genre scholarship since the 1970s, and thus monographs focusing on the genre almost always include an attempt at definition, regardless their overall objectives. John Rieder's outstanding volume forms no exception to this rule, yet it still presents a marked departure from earlier works and falls in line with the scholarly trends in recent SF theory—like Roger Luckhurst's *Science Fiction* (2008) and Andrew Milner's *Locating Science Fiction* (2012)—which try to steer away from the usual taxonomic or chronological mode of investigation in favor of acknowledging the diversity of valid approaches and emphasizing the historicity and heterogeneity of genre traditions.

The volume presents an alternative to the formalism of the “first generation of scholars” (1), a self-reflexive theoretical stand to how the agents within the SF community function in shaping the texts of science fiction, rather than a taxonomic description of what the genre is and is not. Relying on current methods of genre theory, cultural anthropological, and philosophical theories of categorization, Rieder advances the concept of the “mass cultural genre system” (1), a framework in which categories such as popular genres (SF, fantasy, detective fiction) and classical / canonical genres change and interact with each other over the course of their history. This dialectic produces dynamic categories with permeable boundaries and allows for the consideration of the socio-cultural and political environment, the economic and technological processes of production and distribution, as well as the reaction these narratives produce to their specific environment. The themes running through the whole book concern the past and ongoing tensions between the canon, the mass market and niche market productions, and SF's changing positions within this field. The result is one of the best theoretical works on SF published in the past decades, a book that is not only an obligatory reference for genre scholars but may be immensely useful to all academics interested in how genres located within popular culture are formed, interact with each other and even shape their respective communities of practice.

The book is divided into six chapters, three theoretical ones followed by three containing case studies. His first chapter, “On Defining SF, or Not: Genre Theory, SF, and History”—which in almost identical form won the Science Fiction Research Association’s Pioneer Award 2011 and remains one of the best theoretical essays on SF up to date—explores how SF works within an economy of genres and what forces and communities take part in shaping its reception, production, marketing, and consumption. Following the obligatory overview of possible methodologies and the history of definition, Rieder presents his historically grounded inquiry based on varied fields of research, ranging from Wittgenstein’s concept of “family resemblance,” to contemporary genre theory, to cultural anthropological research on communities of practice. This method is novel in two ways: Rieder’s system of analysis incorporates previous SF scholarship into genre history, and, instead of discarding these approaches as deficient, allows for their continued validity.

After exploring the matters of genre and definition, Rieder turns to the question of context, and the second chapter analyzes how mass culture plays a formative role in the production of the literary and cultural phenomenon we call science fiction. Throughout this chapter, Rieder proposes to investigate the discourse between “the mass cultural and the academic genre systems” (33), building on the premise that “the commercial advertisement is the keystone of the mass cultural genre system” (35). Utilizing a wide scope of theorists, ranging from Northrop Frye to Antonio Gramsci, Rieder probes the emergence of nineteenth-century mass culture, explores the centrality of advertisement up to the end of the twentieth century, and finally locates SF within the serialized milieu of the (pulp) magazine culture of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, contrasting mass market and niche market publications. The shortcoming of the chapter, in my opinion, is that it stops short of examining the radical transformation media consumption has undergone in the past decade, with the advent of streaming platforms such as Netflix or Hulu, which have reshaped advertising practices, as well.

The third chapter focuses on genre “beginnings”—a term the author favors above “origins”—where, reiterating his position from chapter 1, Rieder examines the genesis of genres and the misconception of perceiving founding narratives and the establishment of genre conventions as a sequential process, while it is often the other way around. The chapter deals with two markedly different turning points in SF, both being regarded by genre scholarship as potential beginnings: Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel

*Frankenstein* and its location within the Gothic tradition, and the first issue of *Amazing Stories* in 1926, edited by Hugo Gernsback, and its ties to and use of production and marketing strategies. Rather than exploring why these works may be regarded as the first of their kind, Rieder analyzes them with respect to their positions within their own cultural context and inquires into what enabled them to impact SF as a genre in the way they did. While providing fascinating insights, this chapter is not as coherently structured as the earlier ones, and although the two parts are nominally linked by the focus on genre beginnings, the analysis remains slightly lopsided, with *Frankenstein* providing the bulk of the text and the analysis of the pulp magazines' influence in genre formation appearing sketchier.

The fourth chapter delves deeper into the tensions between the canon and mass market SF through the example of Philip K. Dick and presents an acknowledged "change of pace" (94), since instead of commenting on diachronic genre phenomena, a close reading of several Dick novels is at its center. Here Rieder focuses on genre as discourse and views Dick's oeuvre in light of "a certain metatextual content" produced as a result of formulaic repetition (94), demonstrating how the framework of the historical approach can be utilized in the close reading of individual texts. Examining Dick's troubled relationship to SF as a genre and his desire for canonization, Rieder posits that Dick's subversion of SF tropes is not conscious, but rather a disregard for most SF conventions established by that time. As to Dick's critical stance to mass culture, Rieder concludes that in contrast to the techno-focused genre responses at the time "for Dick what counts most of all is the semiological saturation of the environment produced by the technology of the mass communication and entertainment industries and the fetishistic signifying power of commodities, particularly as represented in advertisements" (102).

This chapter only concentrates on Dick's novels, which in light of his extensive and momentous short story corpus leaves the reader with a feeling of loss. While reducing the number of texts discussed is an understandable choice, the corpus is not convincingly argued, and the focal points evaluated in connection with Dick's fiction immediately call to mind the titles of seminal short stories like "The Days of Perky Pat" (game, trauma, commercialization), "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale" (existential crisis), "Second Variety" ("mechanical reproduction," humanity / subjecthood / agency), and "Minority Report" (precognition).

Chapter 5 takes a look at post-war genre trends—generational tensions in the 1960s, the "polemical integration of literary and subcultural SF" (113), and the shift from subculture to mainstream, especially apparent in the Hollywood film industry—through films sourcing Philip K. Dick's narratives and the format

of the SF anthology, with special focus on The James Tiptree Award Anthologies. Rieder proposes to demonstrate that irrespective of the degree of financial backing—the high-budget Hollywood productions attracting a mass audience versus the modestly financed niche anthology series—a marked change can be detected in all communities of practice orbiting the genre. While the analysis and the points made are intriguing, it would have been fruitful to extend the exploration in the direction of the Internet and its pivotal influence on production and consumption practices, a comment already made in connection with the second chapter.

The last chapter continues the previous chapter's investigation into “the resistant, non-hegemonic recoding of SF” (139), with racial demarcations—African-American and Native American artists—constituting the main focus. Rieder showcases three films and one novel, all of them “invasion narratives,” and three of them responses to the hegemonic white normalcy propagated by the 1956 film *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. In connection with the latter, Rieder conclusively argues that opposed to widely decoding this narrative as a projection of the anxiety of a communist takeover, it may just as convincingly be read as a metaphor for “the disappearance of regional difference into mass-cultural national homogeneity” (145). Rieder furthermore examines the possible recoding of the white myth of the frontier into a site of healing and how it can be used by Afrofuturism and Indigenous futurism to establish “a place in the cultural present for groups whose history has been systematically distorted or erased” by white society (155).

What is always delightful in Rieder's texts is the constant self-referentiality, which allows the work to exhibit a refreshing degree of inclusivity, as it acknowledges not only the complexity of the issues discussed, but also the book's own embeddedness in a specific theoretical discourse, with its own historicity and conventions. In addition to its unquestionable scholarly merits the text, in my experience, also lends itself excellently to teaching in an academic setting; the first two chapters especially can be used in any class grappling with genre theory and popular culture. Its reliance on a variety of theoretical frameworks and scientific disciplines, moreover, its pragmatic and clear structure, make it especially fit for use in a university classroom environment. Rieder's book is a must for all academics interested in the field of SF and will surely take its place among the seminal works of SF scholarship in the years to come.

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