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Foreword: Crossing the Border with Darko Suvin

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The great book o'er the border went
And, good folk, that was the end.
But we hope you'll keep in mind
You and I were left behind.
May you now guard science' light
Keep it up and use it right
Lest it be a flame to fall
One day to consume us all.

Bertolt Brecht, *Life of Galileo*[1]

Darko Suvin: A Life in Letters is the second collection of essays by Darko Suvin with which I have had the pleasure to have been involved, the other being Suvin's recently published book, *Defined by a Hollow: Essays on Utopia, Science Fiction, and Political Epistemology* (Peter Lang: 2010). I mention this other volume at the outset, as these two collections should be understood as complements to each other, while both also extend further Suvin's already far-reaching achievements.

The work of Suvin most well known by the European and North American intellectual and scholarly communities falls into two areas. First, in his role as a founding editor of the academic journal *Science-Fiction Studies* and as the single most significant scholar of the form to emerge in the 1970s—Mark Bould recently referred to his earliest English language writings in the field as "the Suvin event"—Suvin played a central role in the establishment of science fiction as a legitimate and important field of scholarly inquiry in its own right.[2] For this latter work in particular, he was named in 1979 the tenth recipient of the Science Fiction Research Association's (SFRA) Pilgrim Award to honor

[1] Bertolt Brecht, *Life of Galileo*, trans. Wolfgang Sauerlander and Ralph Manheim, in *Brecht Collected Plays*, Volume 5 (New York: Vintage, 1972), 96.

[2] Mark Bould, "Introduction: Rough Guide to a Lonely Planet, from Nemo to Neo," in *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction*, ed. Mark Bould and China Miéville (London: Pluto Press, 2009), 18. For a further discussion of the importance of these essays, see Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 2001).

his lifetime contributions. Secondly, in a wide range of essays, some of which are collected together in his volume *To Brecht and Beyond: Soundings in Modern Dramaturgy* (1984), he helped secure for an English-speaking audience the reputation of the great German Marxist playwright and thinker, Bertolt Brecht. Moreover, as highlighted in many of the essays reprinted in this volume, Suvin's work also extends into critical theory, political epistemology, globalization, and Asian (in particular Japanese), literature and culture, some of the last appearing in the volume, *Lessons of Japan: Assayings of Some Intercultural Stances* (1997). Finally, Suvin is a widely published poet, earlier work collected together in the volumes, *The Long March*, *Notes on the Way 1981-1984*, *Poems* (1987) and *Armirana Arkadija* (1990).

All of these rich and diverse interests and accomplishments are on display in the essays and poems collected together in *Defined by a Hollow* and in this special issue of *Paradoxa*. While the essays in the former most prominently illuminate Suvin's contributions to science fiction and Utopian studies, along with his shift in the 1990s to what he calls "political epistemology," the essays in this issue center more, although by no means exclusively, on other aspects of his project: his work on narrative theory, Brecht, modern theater, Japan and Asia, and on various aspects of what social theorists describe as globalization, including its most terrible face in the U.S.-led war on terror. In what follows, I want to argue that the importance of the essays in this special issue of *Paradoxa*, in addition to their inherent interest and the insights they offer into a wealth of pressing concerns, lies in the way they cast Suvin's more well-known contributions to science fiction and Utopian studies in a new light, and thereby help us grasp even more effectively the ways his entire ongoing project offers an effective model for the labors of contemporary intellectuals.

Before delving into these issues, a bit more biographical information will be useful to those less familiar with Darko Suvin and his work. However, let me first recommend at this point that the reader momentarily break off from reading this foreword and turn to the volume's opening poem, "Autobiography 2004: De Darci Natura." While putting on display Suvin's gifts as a poet, this work also offers a view from the inside as it were, a dynamic and vibrant expression of the lived experiences of which the following can only offer the most schematic of outlines. Suvin was born on 19 July 1930 in Zagreb, Croatia. He received his PhD from Zagreb University, the oldest and among the most prestigious of the universities in southeastern Europe, where he also began his teaching career. After running afoul of some of the political currents at the university, Suvin immigrated to North America,

ultimately settling, in the banner year of 1968, at McGill University in Montreal, where he was Professor of English and Comparative Literature until his retirement in 1999. After his retirement, he relocated to Italy, where he resides today.

His interests in dramaturgy, Brecht's work, and science fiction are evident in his early Croatian volumes, *Dva vida dramaturgije: eseji o teatarskoj viziji* (1964), *Od Lukijana do Lunjika* (1965), and *Uvod u Brechta* (1970). After his move to North American, Suvin, along with R.D. Mullen, founded in 1973 *Science-Fiction Studies*, at a moment when academic literary studies was becoming increasingly receptive—in response in part to the vibrancy of the New Left and in part to the innovations of a burgeoning critical theory (movements that, as the essays here also clearly bear out, deeply influenced Suvin's thought)—to scholarly work in the area of what was then referred to as "paraliterature"—popular and genre fiction including science fiction, fantasy, mystery, horror, romance, comics, and children's literature. From his earliest work, Suvin refused the marginalization of science fiction implied by this characterization, not only locating the genre within a long literary tradition of popular transgressive fictions that stretched back to the work of Lucian of Samosata, Thomas More, and François Rabelais, but also consistently maintaining that the finest contemporary science fiction is among the best of all literature produced in the present. "The stakes" at play in science fiction, Suvin argues in an essay on paraliterature, "thus, are the highest imaginable… : the education of Homo sapiens for earthly salvation."[3] Here we see the combination of artistic, philosophical, and political commitment that I will suggest momentarily is characteristic of all of Suvin's writing.

Suvin's first published scholarly essays on science fiction appeared in the mid-1950s, and in English at the end of the 1960s. Many of them have been collected together in four volumes, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (1979); *Victorian Science Fiction in the UK: The Discourses of Knowledge and Power* (1983); *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction* (1988); and *Defined by a Hollow*. As samples of this prolific output, this special issue of *Paradoxa* includes a 1969 popular article written on the occasion of the first moon landing and concerned with early science fictional imaginings by Jules Verne and H.G. Wells of voyages to the moon (moreover, its anti-militarist stance also makes the political investments in all of his writing fully evident); a 1987 open letter to a Japanese reader of *Metamorphoses*, which also reprints a transcript

[3] Darko Suvin, *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction* (Kent, Oh: The Kent State UP, 1988), 20

of his acceptance speech for the SFRA Pilgrim Award; and finally a sobering 2000 assessment of the future possibilities for science fiction in a situation marked by "first, the decomposition of the political horizons of the 60s' counter-culture (or any other oppositional mass politics) and the privatizations of organizing belief, and second, the tremendous loss of prestige by technoscience because of wars and ecological disasters." Suvin also co-edited two volumes of essays collected from the first five years of *Science-Fiction Studies* (published in 1976 and 1978); and the collections, *Other Worlds, Other Seas: Science-Fiction Stories from Socialist Countries* (1970), *H.G. Wells and Modern Science Fiction* (1977), and *US Science Fiction and War/Militarism* (2005), the last opening with a long original essay of his own.

One of the things that makes all of this work so distinctive is the way in which it negotiates the strictures and disciplinary boundaries that define proper academic inquiry. This discipline-transgressing approach is fully on display in what is perhaps Suvin's single most well known scholarly accomplishment: his elaboration of the poetics of modern science fiction. In the landmark 1972 *College English* essay, "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre," a revised version of which served as the opening chapter of *Metamorphoses*, Suvin defines science fiction "as the literature of cognitive estrangement," further elaborating a few pages later his definition in the following way: "SF is, then, a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment."[4] And finally, he subsequently adds, "SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional 'novum' (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive logic."[5]

It is worth paying special attention here to the deep importance of Brecht's work for Suvin's definition of science fiction. The concept of *estrangement* is, of course, derived from Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, itself a politically charged act of readapting (*umfunktioniert*) the Russian Formalist concept of *ostranenie* (остранение), the distancing of the reader or viewer of a work of art from the assumed or naturalized world they inhabit un-self-consciously in their everyday lives. (The other major figure influencing Suvin's thought here as elsewhere is Brecht's great Marxist contemporary and the most important theorist of Utopia in the first half of the twentieth century, Ernst Bloch). In this move, we see at work one of Suvin's most characteristic and productive intellectual

[4] Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), 4 and 7-8.

[5] Ibid., 63.

strategies, something that will also become quickly evident to the reader of the diverse and wide-ranging pieces collected in this issue: Suvin's willingness to cross boundaries of all kinds—between disciplines, forms, and so-called high and low culture—and productively cross-fertilize concepts drawn from a variety of sources. This is something as true of the form of Suvin's writing as it is of the content: the essays and poems in this volume of *Paradoxa* repeatedly challenges the protocols of what constitutes "proper" scholarly writing.

Equally significantly, as I argue elsewhere, Suvin's linking of science fiction and Brecht's dramaturgy helps us more effectively recognize science fiction, along with film, as one of the most significant cultural technologies (*techné*) to emerge out of the period of tremendous intellectual, political, and artistic ferment known as modernism.[6] Suvin's championing of both Brecht and science fiction as premiere achievements of twentieth century global culture thus contributes immeasurably to the project of opening up the closures of what Fredric Jameson names the "ideology of modernism" that rose to prominence in the post-World War II context of "late modernism."[7] This ideology of modernism—a product of the period of the Cold War and what the political economist Giovanni Arrighi calls the "long twentieth century," the hegemony of the U.S. in global capitalism—turns on an absolute privileging of the "autonomy of the aesthetic," drawing sharp distinctions between both art and politics and art and mass or popular culture, including, of course, science fiction. The challenge to this ideology of modernism continues in Jameson's own contributions to the revisioning of both Brecht's work and science fiction, *Brecht and Method* (1998) and *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005). In these two works in particular, Jameson's indebtedness to Suvin's thought is evident throughout. In turn, the long-standing intellectual exchange between Suvin and Jameson—the latter, along with the great British and Welsh Marxist intellectual and fellow scholar of theater, Raymond Williams, representing Suvin's most significant Anglo-American interlocutors—continues in a thoughtful review essay of Jameson's *Brecht and Method* by Suvin, first published on the occasion of the 1998 centenary of Brecht's birth and reprinted below as chapter 14.

[6] See Phillip E. Wegner, "Jameson's Modernisms; or, the Desire Called Utopia," *Diacritics* 37, no. 4 (Winter, 2007): 3-20; and my forthcoming, *Ontologies of the Possible: Utopia, Science Fiction, and Globalization* (Oxford: Peter Lang).

[7] See Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (New York: Verso, 2002), 161-79.

The last decade or so has witnessed within the science fiction scholarly community the publication of a series of critical reassessments of Suvin's pioneering work. While a number of these engagements are quite productive, building upon Suvin's insights and retooling them for a very different intellectual and institutional situation than that in which they originally intervened, other responses have cast his legacy in a more doubtful light.[8] Roger Luckhurst, for example, argues that "Suvin's definition of SF is not historical but political—cognitive estrangement arises from Suvin's particular take on Marxism." While he acknowledges the "immense value" of Suvin's "preparedness to think with critical paradigms about a popular form," Luckhurst maintains, "his theory of SF essentially condemns much of the genre in a way that, although from a very different political perspective, is essentially continuous with high cultural disdain for popular culture."[9]

There is a fundamental contradiction at play in Luckhurst's evaluation, one that helps bring into sharper focus what is at stake in one of the debates currently taking place in the field of literary and cultural criticism: a debate that stages a stark choice between either formalism, old or new, or historicism.[10] On the one hand, Luckhurst in effect accuses Suvin of being another late modernist, once again positing a fundamental "formalist or conceptual" (read *aesthetic*) distinction between high or great art and culture.[11] At the same time, Luckhurst re-enacts the old late modernist distinction between art/culture and politics, or what he refers to as "Suvin's particular take on Marxism." As Jameson notes in his comments on the related "Against Theory" arguments of Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels that helped set the stage for the hegemony of the New Historicism (out of which the cultural historicist approach to science fiction develops), readers of Luckhurst's polemic are left with

[8] For a sampling of some of these responses, see Gary Westfahl, *The Mechanics of Wonder: The Creation of the Idea of Science Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998); Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000); the essays collected together in *Learning from Other Worlds: Estrangement, Cognition, and the Politics of Science Fiction and Utopia*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001); and the essays collected together in *Red Planets*.

[9] Roger Luckhurst, *Science Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 8.

[10] For a useful overview of the debates between New Historicism and New Formalism, see Marjorie Levinson, "What is New Formalism?" *PMLA 122*, no. 2 (2007): 558-69. I touch on these issues in the final section of my essay, "The Beat Cops of History; or, the Paranoid Style in American Intellectual Politics," *Arizona Quarterly 66*, no. 2 (2010): 149-67. And finally, for a related discussion, see Fredric Jameson's Introduction to *The Modernist Papers* (New York: Verso, 2007), ix-xxi.

[11] Ibid., 11.

the distinct feeling "that we are being told to stop doing something, that new taboos whose motivation we cannot grasp are being erected with passionate energy and conviction."[12] Thus, while he will go on to claim that his own cultural historicist approach is "less judgmental and prescriptive," the real target of Luckhurst's judgments and prescriptions is clearly Suvin's expressed radical revolutionary, dare we say Utopian, commitments. Suvin never denies that his work renders judgments because what explicitly drives all of his intellectual engagements is the desire to recover, and encourage the future production of, a tradition of cultural texts that contributes affirmatively to efforts not only to critically engage with contemporary global capitalism, but ultimately to replace it with a far more humane mode of living in the world. To do otherwise, would be to produce work that remains in the ideological trap of what Brecht refers to as "*folgenlos*—what had no particular material consequences, and fostered no particular change."[13]

Thus, the continuity that Luckhurst finds between Suvin's politically charged evaluations and cultural elite dismissals of popular culture is imaginary (I deploy the term imaginary here in the double Lacanian sense, of positing images of the self and other that are at a distance from the real). The latter are forms of what another of Brecht's most significant intellectual progeny, Roland Barthes, names, in an intervention that takes place at the very height of the original late modernism, *mythologies*. (The impact of Barthes' work on Suvin was a lasting one, and Suvin informs me that he "read *Mythologies* in French quite early on, I think around 1960, because I had accidentally ordered for the Department library his *Michelet* [Editions du Seuil, 1954] and was stunned by his approach, so from then on I read almost all he published.") *Mythologies* are diverse cultural significations—novels, essays, reviews, photographs, film images, cultural practices, sporting events, legal trials, built spaces, and so forth—that work to "transform history into nature."[14] Barthes further notes, "myth is depoliticized speech. Myth does not deny things, on the contrary its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact."[15] In Barthes's sense then it would be Luckhurst's apparently politically neutral historicist approach—implicitly less

[12] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 183.

[13] Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (New York: Verso, 1998), 25.

[14] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill & Wang, 1972), 129.

[15] Ibid., 143.

judgmental, descriptive rather than prescriptive, and "more inclusive"—that would have far more kinship with the mythological form of high culturalist attitudes.[16]

Barthes goes on to argue,

> There is therefore one language which is not mythical, it is the language of man [sic] as producer: wherever man speaks in order to transform reality and no longer to preserve it as an image, wherever he links his language to the making of things, meta-language is referred to a language-object, and myth is impossible. This is why revolutionary language proper cannot be mythical. Revolution is defined as a cathartic act meant to reveal the political load of the world; it makes the world; and its language, all of it, is functionally absorbed in this making.... The bourgeoisie hides the fact that it is the bourgeoisie and thereby produces myth; revolution announces itself openly as revolution and thereby abolishes myth.[17]

Speaking, or writing, in order to transform reality rather than preserving it as an image: Barthes's description of the de-reifying, anti-mythological force of revolutionary language can serve as an effective characterization of Suvin's work as well, both in his essays on science fiction and in those you are about to read here.

In addition to calling into question the separations between various disciplinary concerns and between culture and politics, there is a third way in which Suvin's project teaches us to challenge the borders that still define our contemporary intellectual labors. This work too is already evident in Suvin's writings on science fiction. In his *Introduction*, Luckhurst regretfully notes that in his study he has "limited the range to American and British SF almost exclusively."[18] Now while such an approach does enable Luckhurst to offer any number of valuable reflections on particular science fiction texts, and even on something of the nature of the generic institution within these national cultural contexts, the re-imposition of the borders of nations and language has the effect of distorting our understanding of the genre. This is because science fiction occupies what Pascale Casanova, speaking of the novel form more generally, names "international literary space, or else of the world republic of letters ... a long historical process through which international literature—literary creation freed from its political and

[16] Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, 11.
[17] Barthes, *Mythologies*, 146.
[18] Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, 10.

national dependencies—has progressively invented itself."[19] Conversely, the "appropriation of literature and literary histories by political nations" has the effect, Casanova argues, of rendering criticism "blind to a certain number of transnational phenomena that have permitted a specifically literary world to gradually emerge."[20]

From his earliest writings—as evident again in the essay on the "lessons of selenography"—Suvin has stressed the transnational and global nature of science fiction. The first part of the second section of *Metamorphoses* offers a survey of modern practices of "cognitive estrangement," extending from the early sixteenth through the latter part of the nineteenth centuries (while also pointing back toward pre-modern "Hellenic" and "Hellenistic-cum-Roman" traditions) and ranging across the European continent and into the United States. The second part of this section opens with a discussion of the work of H.G. Wells, which founds the specifically modernist form of cognitive estranging literature that will be named in the 1920s by the American writer and editor Hugo Gernsback "science fiction."[21] He then concludes the book with a survey of nineteenth and twentieth century Russian and Soviet science fiction, and an overview of the accomplishments of the great Czech modernist writer, Karel Capek, whose work—with the singular exception of his play, *R.U.R.*, that gave the world the word "robot" (and which ironically, Suvin maintains, represents "the weakest part of his opus")—remains to this day deeply underappreciated by British and U.S. readers.[22]

I would suggest that it is Suvin's own experiences of migration, border crossing, and marginality in the modern world system that makes his work so attuned to the need to approach literature and other cultural phenomenon in a truly global context. As the essays collected together in this volume indicate, Suvin continues to expand his intellectual horizons, both bringing into focus particular aspects of and freely borrowing from a diverse array of cultural and intellectual traditions. It is in its myriad forms of border crossings—and in its openness to diverse perspectives, the connections its draws across various fields, disciplines, and cultures, and the depth of its political commitments—that the real importance of Suvin's work for our dire present situation emerges.

[19] Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M.B. Debevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), xii.

[20] Ibid., xi.

[21] See Sam Moskowitz, "How Science Fiction Got its Name," *The Prentice Hall Anthology of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, Ed. Garyn G. Roberts (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 1127–35.

[22] Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 270.

Such an approach is brilliantly on display in Suvin's essay, reprinted here as Chapter 13, "On the Epistemology and Pragmatics of Intercultural Theater Studies." In this wide-ranging and provocative discussion of contemporary intercultural theater studies, Suvin draws the first of the four theses he proposes from Barthes's reading of Bunraku, the traditional Japanese puppet theater. On this basis, Suvin establishes an opposition between "fetishized and lovable bodies," an opposition whose importance he goes on to argue lies in its modeling of "two opposed epistemic models of understanding and values." The next section of the essay turns to the controversy surrounding Peter Brook's staging of *Mahabharata*. Here Suvin develops a second thesis that could readily apply to his own project as a whole: "when appropriation furthers human creativity or productivity, the psychological pain collaterally produced should be bourne." In Brook's case, however, this appropriation fuels an operation that Suvin, in his third thesis, calls "mythical estrangement," an embracing of an "illusory plenitude of being" fantasized to be possessed by the other. Finally, Suvin turns to *mugen nô*, the classical Japanese theatrical form concerned with the realm of the supernatural, spirits, and ghosts, in order to develop his fourth and final thesis: "The alternative, the fertile, way to practice interculturalism is to doubt a presumed *Western* universal." This then enables Suvin to postulate a final crucial opposition between mythical—"A performance like Brook's makes a Westernized *Other* confirm and update the West's globalizing Self and value-system"—and critical estrangements—"we—our ruling image and value-systems—can become strange to ourselves." This latter, Suvin then concludes, would involve "a shift of paradigm, with the full force of Thomas Kuhn's sense of paradigm shifts as revolutionary, in my opinion today the beginning of wisdom." It is precisely this kind of emergent wisdom that arises from Suvin's myriad practices of border crossing.

Let me conclude this foreword with a brief note on the organization of the collection. As the title suggests, this volume is meant to present something of the contours and trajectory of Suvin's rich and complex intellectual life in, among, and of letters. Hence, in a large part, the essays are presented in the chronological order of their writing, albeit with some of them being revised at a later date (indicated by the second date following the title). At the same time, we have assembled the selections under three broad headings, each of which contains a number of poems that set a more personal affective context for the work that follows. The first section following the introductory material brings together a diverse range of essays and poems selected from Suvin's writings in the 1970s and 1980s, and explores topics ranging from science fiction to

issues in narratological theory, to the essays and poems that result from Suvin's encounters with Asia. The second section, composed largely of essays written in the 1990s, brings together the briefest of samplings of Suvin's investigations in dramaturgy more generally and Brecht's work in particular. The final section, made up of essays and poems most of which were originally written in the last decade, confronts in an immediate and effective way the transformed landscape, wrought by the forces of globalization and political violences of all kinds, that we now collectively inhabit. Finally, the collection concludes on a note of affirmation, with a meditation on the lessons for the present of communism, as "a locus, an orientation for movement, and a horizon," as well as of the Yugoslavian experiment, on which he is now working. This is followed by a very short poem, whose title, "Ausklang: My Lady Hope," signals one final time the desires that are expressed in the poem, the collection as a whole, and, most importantly, the life to which it gives voice. It has been a rich and exemplary life, one that we as readers now have the privilege to help celebrate.

Gainesville, Fl
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