Zoran Živković

First Contact and Time Travel

Selected Essays and Short Stories

Springer

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To Dragoljub Kojčić, my dear friend

Preface

The two main parts of this book—essays and fiction—originated during two rather distant periods of my life. With one exception, all the nonfiction pieces were written in the second half of the 1970s, nearly twenty years before I embarked on fiction. At that time, in my late twenties and early thirties, I was a young scholar working on my MA and PhD theses. I hadn't even remotely considered the possibility of becoming an author myself.

Strange as it might seem today, my area of academic interest was then revolutionary: science fiction. Although by that time the SF genre had already abandoned its origins in pulp literature and started to produce works of indisputable artistic value, it was still far from being a favorite subject in proverbially conservative academic circles.

I was very fortunate indeed to have an exceptional mentor, professor Nikola Milošević, who, although by no means an expert in science fiction himself, realized that it possessed the potential to offer new insights into some of the fundamental dilemmas, not only of the art of prose, but also, more generally, in his principal area of interest—the history of ideas.

In my PhD thesis ("The Origin of Science Fiction as a Genre of Artistic Prose," 1982) I tried to explain a unique phenomenon—how of all genres of pulp literature only science fiction had succeeded in becoming art. In the long run, however, my MA thesis had the quality of a genuinely pioneering study: "Anthropomorphism and the First Contact Theme in the SF Works of Arthur C. Clarke," 1979. Sir Arthur told me in one of his letters that, to the best of his knowledge, this was also the first academic paper ever written on his SF works. (Although flattered, I never cared to check because I don't feel that precedence is really very important in these matters.)

Apart from first contact, I was also interested in a second theme unique to science fiction—time travel (or, to use Lem's beautiful neologism, chronomotion). In my last, brief essay on science fiction (1995) I recapitulated all the subaspects of this very challenging theme in order to identify those that might have greater literary potential.

For a decade and a half (1975–1990) I tried my hand at every aspect of science fiction—but one. I wrote several books on it including a two-volume set: *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. I translated more than 40 SF books, I was a critic, a reviewer, and a commentator on the SF genre, I hosted a TV series on the history of SF cinema and attended numerous conventions, conferences, festivals, and so on.

But I was never a science fiction writer.

A somewhat simplified answer to the inevitable question as to how I could possibly not become an SF writer with such a background is that by the time I began to write my first piece of fiction in 1993, science fiction had already gone into decline. This is not the place to elaborate on this, but it is my view that science fiction no longer exists. It belongs to the history of literature as one of the two great movements of the art of "fantastika" in the twentieth century. (The other is, of course, magical realism.) In the twenty-first century, we don't write science fiction because we don't need it. We live it. It is all around us. For better or worse.

In any case, what I write is not science fiction. (Curiously enough, no matter how often I repeat this simple fact, for the great majority of my compatriots who care to have an opinion I will forever remain a science fiction writer. Particularly for those who, for one reason or another, have had neither the opportunity nor the interest to read any of my 22 works of fiction.) I consider myself a writer without prefixes. Simply a writer.

On the other hand, not being an SF writer doesn't mean that I avoid themes introduced by science fiction. On the contrary, it is precisely through its new approaches to old SF themes that the new "fantastika" of the twenty-first century, which still doesn't even have a name, is slowly but surely taking its final shape.

If I had been an SF writer, I would never have been able to write *Time Gifts* or "The Puzzle"—my variations on the two pivotal science fiction themes: time travel and first contact. It took a long time to complete what I started back in the 1970s as an essayist. But completion would never have been possible without my being a writer.

Novi Beograd, Serbia — Zoran Živković
March 2018

Contents

Part I Essays

1 The Theme of First Contact in the SF Works of Arthur C. Clarke 3
1.1 Introduction 3
1.2 Three Short Stories 5
1.2.1 "Report on Planet Three" 5
1.2.2 "Crusade" 7
1.2.3 "History Lesson" 11
1.3 "A Meeting with Medusa" 14
1.3.1 "There Is Life on Jupiter: And It's Big..." 14
1.3.2 Medusae and Mantas 18
1.3.3 Prime Directive 25
1.3.4 Noumen and Phenoumen 28
1.4 Conclusion 34

2 Utopia in Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* 37

3 Chronomotion 45

4 The Labyrinth Theme in Science Fiction 51

5 Annotations 1 55

Part II Fiction

6 The Bookshop 61

7 The Puzzle 73

8 Time Gifts 83
The Astronomer 83
The Paleolinguist 97
The Watchmaker 111
The Artist 127

9 The Cone 141

10 Annotations 2 147

Part I

Essays

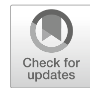
First Contact

Let us therefore tell the truth to ourselves: we are not searching for "all possible civilizations," but above all those which are anthropomorphic. We introduce the law and order of experiment into Nature and after phenomena of this kind we want to meet beings similar to ourselves. Nevertheless, we do not succeed in perceiving them. Do they in fact exist at all? There is indeed something deeply saddening in the silence of the stars as an answer to that question, a silence which is so complete as to be eternal.

—Stanislaw Lem, *Summa Technologiae*

Sometimes, in the dark of the night, I lie awake and wonder if different intelligences can communicate at all; or, if I've had a particularly bad day, whether the phrase 'different intelligences' has meaning at all.

—Isaac Asimov, *Gods Themselves*



1

The Theme of First Contact in the SF Works of Arthur C. Clarke

Sooner or later, it was bound to happen.
Arthur C. Clarke, *Rendezvous with Rama*

1.1 Introduction

The "first contact" theme in science fiction is characterized by its two generically different kinds of protagonist: the human and the alien. The notion of alien characters in fiction introduces a fundamental confusion, the resolution of which depends on what we would term the "artistic coherence" of the "first contact" theme: namely, is it at all possible to imagine and conjure up from a human perspective something essentially alien? The degree of difference between the human and alien protagonists in the "first contact" does not have to be absolute, of course, but the problem then changes in the quantitative and not the qualitative sense.

The human/nonhuman confusion appears on two levels, that is, in the context of the two different viewpoints attributing human characteristics to the alien which can exist in a work of sf. One is the perspective of the human characters in the work, and the other is of the author himself, as present in the narrative voice. From each of these perspectives, aliens can be ascribed human

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characteristics, but these two anthropomorphizations will not have an identical effect on the coherence of the first contact theme.

The whole skill of writing sf works with a "first contact" theme is in fact embodied in avoiding the anthropomorphic pitfalls which appear during the process of imagining and conjuring up alien characters with independent status. Furthermore, of course, the question arises as to uttermost limits, and whether it is at all possible to portray a truly alien entity by literary means.

When the human characters anthropomorphize the alien characters, the "first contact" theme serves as a means of artistic expression, in the sense that this factor is used as the best possible motivation for certain human characteristics and states. If, however, the anthropomorphization is from the perspective of the narrative voice, the coherence of the first contact theme is often disturbed, inasmuch as it rests on the fundamental assumption of alienness of the nonhuman protagonists.

There does exist, however, a kind of anthropomorphization of an alien entity from the perspective of the narrative voice that does not imperil the coherence of a work. This appears in those works in which the author uses the alien as a mirror, and in which the nonhuman character does not have an independent status but exists only because, through its mediation, one can make a statement about people. When, in contrast, the alien does have independent status, or when its role does not consist of the mere illustration of something basically human, then it is only in this case that one can speak of the real meaning of "first contact."

One of the authors who most thoroughly examines this confusion in his first contact stories is Arthur C. Clarke. Probably his most successful work in this respect is his famous novella "A Meeting with Medusa." To show to what extent Clarke had previously avoided anthropomorphic difficulties, we will first consider some of his short stories of a reflective type which focus on revealing basic aspects of the emergence of these factors in human consciousness.

With regard to the nature of man's relations towards an alien entity, one can differentiate three kinds of anthropomorphism in three Clarke parables of "first contact": anthropocentrism, anthropochauvinism, and simple anthropomorphism.

The first type, anthropocentrism, regards human beings as the central fact and final aim of the universe and so is a priori hostile towards the possibility of the existence of any other forms of intelligent life. The second type, anthropochauvinism, does not exclude this possibility but assumes the superior position of man in relation to any alien being. Finally, in the context of the third type, anthropomorphism, the possibility is allowed not only of the existence of alien entities, but also of their superiority in relation to man. Any possible intellectual intuition about aliens is, however, thwarted by innate

deficiencies in the anthropomorphic nature of man's cognitive apparatus, as all aliens are seen in terms of human cognition. As examples of the types of anthropomorphic deficiencies, we will discuss three stories by Clarke: "Report on Planet Three," "Crusade," and "History Lesson."

1.2 Three Short Stories

1.2.1 "Report on Planet Three"

In "Report on Planet Three" there are two narrative perspectives. The first is represented by a document written by a certain Martian scientist at a time when our own civilization was still in its infancy, devoted to a consideration of the possibility of the existence of life in the third planet of the Solar System. The second perspective is that of the translator from Earth through his comments on the document, which was found in the ruins of the now-destroyed Martian civilization.

Although only the translator is aware of the "encounter" of two cosmic civilizations, the story focuses on the report of the scientist from Mars. The report represents a conspicuous example of orthodox planetary provincialism, the special feature of which is that it is expressed exactly from the standpoint of "official science," which has in this case already reached a level where it has mastered the technique of interplanetary flight.

The geophysical data on Earth, upon which the Martian bases his consideration of the possibility of life on Planet Three, have been obtained by valid astronomical methods. Troubles arise, however, when he gets down to interpreting these data—an interpretation in which the weak points are easily perceptible, as they are founded on inappropriate criteria.

The fallacy is reflected in the criteria for evaluating the conditions for possible life on Earth. The Martian scientist is conditionally in the right when he asserts that life will never develop on the Solar System's third planet—because what he has in mind by "life" is a notion valid exclusively in the biophysical context of Mars. To give it more general meaning outside this context points directly to the existence of certain deficiencies of interpretation.

The form of life native to the "red planet" cannot indeed develop on Earth, but this does not mean that it is unable in any way to nurture some other forms of life. The presence of water, oxygen and the hot regions round the Equator—those things chosen by the Martian scientist as his strongest arguments—not only did not prevent the beginning of life on our planet, but in

fact represent the essential conditions for its birth and development. It is precisely in these comparisons that the provincial criteria of the document entitled Report on Planet Three suffer a total collapse: when conditions for the birth of life are in question, Mars has already been shown as unsuitable in principle to be a yardstick for Earth.

What, however, lies deeper within Clarke's story and makes it a good example for our consideration? What is the real cause of this Mars-centric fallacy? Is it, simply, a matter of intellectual immaturity and incapacity to outgrow the local circumstances of one's own world which, in an inappropriately provincial way, proclaim themselves as a yardstick of the whole universe, or is there possibly something else involved?

That the "errors" of the main character of the story "Report on Planet Three" are also influenced by other factors, which can't be reduced to mere intellectual limitation, is demonstrated by certain features of his report. The first part of the document, in which the Martian scientist merely cites the geophysical characteristics of our planet, sticking to the factual plane during this process, already reveals a hostile attitude towards the existence of life on Earth. The uncompromising negativity appears predominantly in the intonation and method of reporting the data. But this does not diminish its effect.

For example, when he needs to describe the particular colors of our planet, the scientist from Mars uses rather vague terms which, so the translator from Earth asserts, can be translated alternatively as "hideous" and "virulent." The entire further series of data—the existence of a large quantity of water on the Earth's surface, the density of the atmosphere, the presence of "poisonous and very reactive" oxygen, the "intolerable temperatures" at the Equator, and the "gigantic" force of gravity—are worded in such a way as to suggest a picture of Earth as a special kind of hell.

The irony in the report reaches its peak in a request for "scientific objectivity." "However, let us be open-minded"—says the author of the Report on Planet Three—"and prepared to accept even the most unlikely possibilities, as long as they do not conflict with scientific laws." "Scientific objectivity," which ought to be a valid criterion for a degree of "open-mindedness," is a calculated alibi for the lowest form of xenophobic provincialism, which is expressed when he begins to consider the hypotheses on the possibilities for the existence of higher intelligent forms on Earth, as a specific counterpart to the Martians.

The very calculated devaluation of these ideas is reflected in the fact that, without exception, they are ascribed to the authors of science fiction and speculative works, the worth of which has already been determined by the very fact that they appear as an open counterweight to "official science," which the Martian scientist refers to abundantly and on any occasion. The real nature

of his fallacy becomes clear exactly on this plane. There is no question of any intellectual limitation but an attitude which does not flinch from "overlooking" the facts, simply in order to preserve an illusory adherence to one particular genocentric picture of the world.

The thing, however, which to a certain degree remains unclear within such an interpretation of the work is the overstressed anthropomorphization, as much of the Martian scientist as of his document Report on Planet Three, and of the broader framework which this document assumes. There is only one satisfactory answer to this illusory inexplicability: The story in fact represents a parable of man at the beginning of the cosmic era, and the provincial nature of the document Report on Planet Three displays all the features of orthodox anthropomorphism.

This exchange of roles was used by Clarke because taking the example of Earth as a foreign planet reveals contradictions that arise when local yardsticks are unreservedly proclaimed to be universal. Only when one realizes that it is in fact humanity's perspective which is involved in "Report on Planet Three" does the other, more hidden system of motivation for the lowest aspect of anthropomorphism become evident.

In addition to human intellectual limitations, which at least in principle do not have to be unbridgeable obstacles, Clarke introduces one more element with a different nature and effect: This is man's need to defend at any cost his dominant position in the natural order, a position seriously imperiled by the appearance of some new intelligent entity.

Human ambition expresses itself through intolerance and open disregard for anything that would directly or indirectly cast into doubt his status as the only intelligent being. This is thus the most orthodox and lowest form of anthropomorphism—anthropocentrism.

1.2.2 "Crusade"

We encounter a more complex form of anthropomorphism which no longer takes an a priori hostile attitude towards other kinds of intelligent life, but still retains the idea of superiority, an idea in this case based on a conviction about an exclusively "natural" origin, in the story "Crusade."

The protagonist in this work, a gigantic entity of electronic intelligence, has evolved in a world that is a natural "computer's paradise." This cosmic body is situated far away from the red-hot centers of the galaxies and the temperature on it reaches only a fraction of a degree above absolute zero. The superconductivity that prevails in its seas of liquid helium has created the perfect